

Author:
616th Special
Information
Battalion

The background of the cover features two anime-style characters. On the left is a woman with long black hair and red eyes, wearing a blue and white military uniform with a large white fur collar. On the right is a man with short red hair and blue eyes, wearing a similar blue and white military uniform with a black hat and a large white fur collar. They are both looking towards the viewer. The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a city or landscape with a large, glowing yellow light source in the upper right.

Her Majesty's Swarm

vol. 3

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Popedom of Frantz and Surrounding Areas

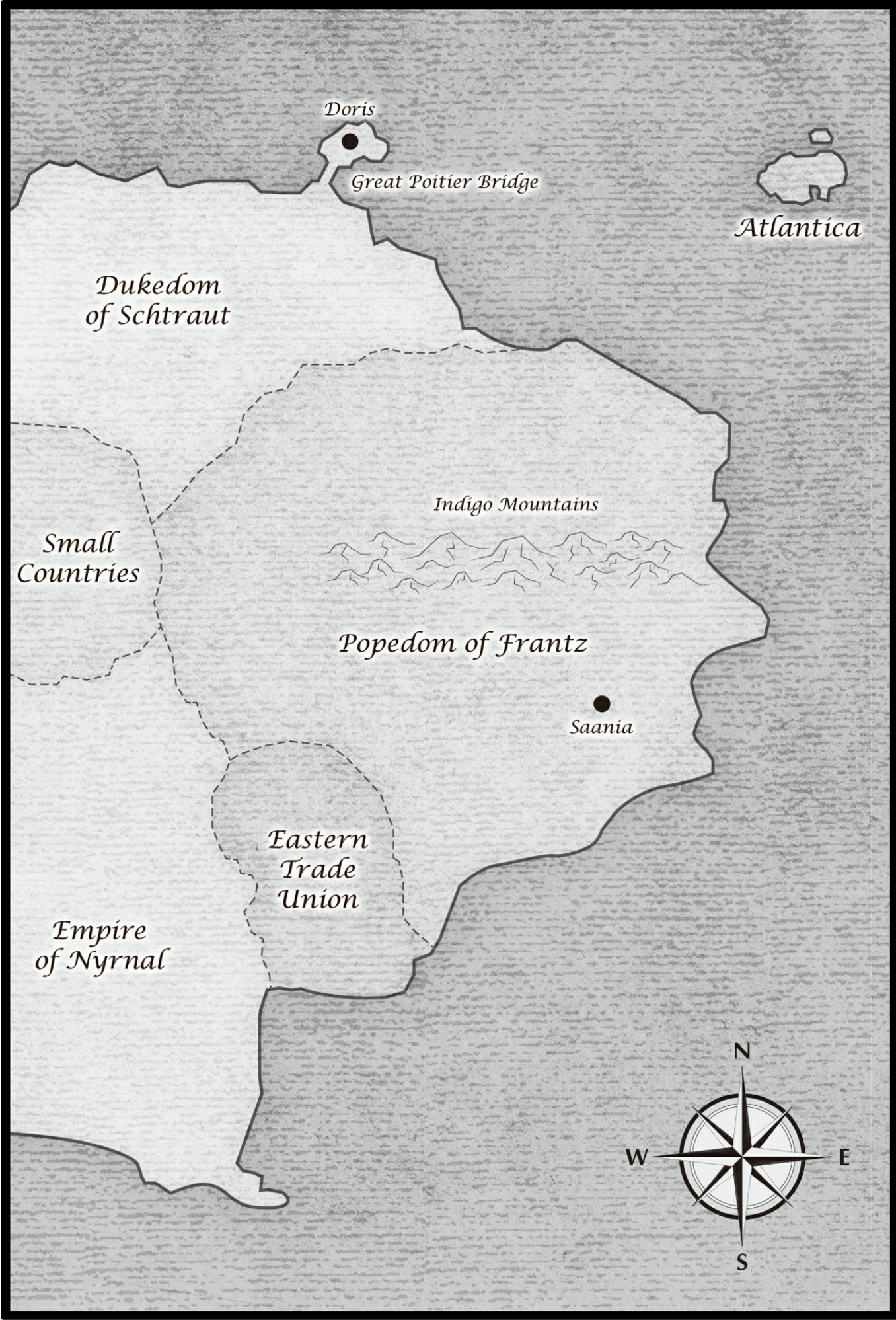


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A Dip in the Ocean

I had conquered the Dukedom of Schtraut. It was a victory built atop countless deaths: Duke Sharon, Basil de Buffon, the people of the Adventurers' Guild... None of these people had deserved their fates, nor had all the brave little Swarms that lost their lives in the conflict.

My Swarm feared nothing; many unflinchingly strode into certain death so that we could get just that much closer to our victory. Their lives were necessary sacrifices. If not for them, we would not have won.

Irritatingly, the Dukedom was connected to the great power of the south—the Empire of Nyrnal—via the elven forest. On top of that, it bordered the Popedom of Frantz to the east. I had successfully driven a wedge between Frantz and Nyrnal during the International Council, but after just one country declared war on us, a huge target had been painted on our backs. The other major power was always seeking to take advantage of the fact that we were pressed on one front to attack us on another.

As such, I made reinforcing our borders' defenses our first priority. The Swarms built walls and erected Eyeball Spires along the borders. Eyeball Spires were fixed defensive structures that automatically attacked any approaching enemy. In addition, they also surveyed their surroundings and would alert us if an army were to approach the border.

Still, Schtraut's own borders were terribly vast. I had a large force of Worker Swarms start construction, accompanied by Ripper Swarms to protect them, but there was no telling when they'd finish fortifying the entire border.

We started by working on the border with Frantz. In my eyes, Frantz was the more immediate threat, as it had organized the allied army for the express purpose of fighting us.

Today, too, additional Eyeball Spires were being built along the border.

Work, work, work.

For the time being, nothing seemed to get in the way of setting up our defenses. Perhaps the Poppedom wasn't afraid of us, or it thought the walls would be easy to tear down. While they weren't easily broken, our walls were only made of stones held together by the Worker Swarms' saliva; they weren't indestructible.

But if it seemed like the walls might be attacked, we'd simply deploy forces to the affected location. The walls were there to stall our enemies, not stop them altogether. Between the long borders Schtraut held with Frantz and our own borders with Nyrnal, the Swarms' forces were spread thin. That meant the enemy would have to attack our fortifications one at a time. And while they were held back by the walls, we'd mobilize our forces to intercept.

Such was the strategy I'd decided upon for the time being. As I went over it once more in my mind, I watched over the walls' construction.

Work, work! Build, my peons, build!

"Y-Your Majesty?" Sérignan shot me a dubious look as I egged the Worker Swarms on in my head.

Aww, not the collective consciousness again. She heard my chanting.

"Ignore me, Sérignan. I was just, uhh, firing myself up."

"I... see."

She still seemed doubtful, but I didn't pay it much mind. After all, the border was so long that if I didn't sing in my head, I wouldn't be able to stay sane. Rather than building in a straight line, I had the Worker Swarms stagger the Eyeball Spires so their lines of fire would intersect.

The game had taught me that victory went to the one who made the first move, so I rarely relied on defensive structures like these. My mentality as an Arachnea player was to overwhelm the enemy with offensive tactics, like Ripper Swarm rushes, rather than go on the defensive.

Put another way, the Arachnea became much less effective if it had to focus strictly on defense. The faction was built around relentless attacks, and the reward for massacres was the flesh of the fallen, which could be used to create meatballs and increase its ranks.

Turtling with defensive structures would be a strategic mistake in the Arachnea's case, since that would limit the rate at which it could build up its numbers and instead put the pace of the battle in the enemy's hands. Had I fought only defensive battles with the Arachnea, I wouldn't have won nearly as many games as I did. That made sense; the game needed to be balanced, and no faction could be invincible.

Given our current situation, however, I had to rethink our tactics. I had essentially no information on what the enemy was plotting, especially when it came to the Nyrnal Empire. The Empire had left the alliance, true, but I didn't expect it to just putz around and mind its own business. Then there was that talk of dragons—the wyverns only Nyrnal could supposedly employ.

Wyverns were a subspecies of dragon, and I associated dragons with something very specific... which gave me a *very* bad feeling. So far, we hadn't encountered other factions from the game, but that didn't mean they weren't out there somewhere. Assuming the wyverns were just regular monsters, everything was fine. But if my suspicions were correct, and they weren't mere monsters, the Arachnea was going to be pitted against a very menacing foe.

This was just one more reason I was focusing on cinching up our defenses. We kept a wary eye on what the enemy was up to and prepared to strike. We'd likely need to deal with Frantz first, but we had to try to gather information on both of them moving forward. Hence, yours truly was currently engaged in the rather boring task of building border fortifications.

Perhaps it had been optimistic of me to think that, given enough time, the Swarm would learn how to build these on their own.

"The border is seriously so long... I hope we have enough resources to build all the walls."

Creating enough fortifications to cover the entire length of the border would require a great deal of resources. I had ordered the Worker Swarms to cut down trees and dig up rocks, but I was beginning to doubt if our goal was even possible.

My simple math led me to believe we would have enough for the walls and the Eyeball Spires, but some of the terrain along the borders wasn't even solid

ground. That meant some of the walls would need to be built in a twisting, zig-zaggy fashion. Given the lumber and stone we had at the moment, I wasn't sure that was manageable...

"Your Majesty, a word?" a voice called out while I was crunching numbers.

It was one of the Ripper Swarms.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Yes. We were attacked by what appears to be an enemy force. We managed to push them back, but only barely, and the enemy got away with some of our resources."

As it answered my question, the Ripper Swarm transmitted what it had seen through the collective consciousness.

"They... came from the sea?"

What I saw was a group of men disembarking a medium-sized sailing ship and stepping onto smaller boats, which they then rowed up to the shores of a coastal town I'd conquered. Unfortunately, the town was full of Worker Swarms trying to rebuild the place and only a handful of Ripper Swarms stationed to defend them. The Ripper Swarms tried to fight back, but they were surrounded and quickly defeated.

They *did* take down a few of the enemy's men, though, and what few Ripper Swarms remained escorted the Worker Swarms to safety. Meanwhile, the attackers raided the town's storehouses, stealing the resources I'd saved up to unlock new structures. After that, they fled back to their ship.

"Pirates? Seriously?"

Pirates were the only sort of people I could picture doing something like this. It fit their M.O.—they appeared from the sea, stole other people's goods, and skedaddled.

"They were too sloppy to be scouts from Frantz. They're probably pirates," I concluded.

"Pirates, you say? I wonder where they came from," Sérignan wondered aloud. "It would be challenging for us to pursue a pirate ship, but if they have a

stronghold, we might be able to stage a landing.”

“This is annoying, though. I didn’t expect someone to attack us by sea.” I heaved a sigh. “We can cover the borders with all the defenses we want, but it’s all pointless if we’re exposed to the open ocean. We have to consider fortifying the shores now, too. Aaah, this is giving me a headache...”

I’d thought that fortifying our terrestrial borders would put us in the clear, but I’d neglected to consider the possibility that our enemies could simply sail into our territory. While our side was now capable of handling ships, we only had a handful of serviceable crafts.

We’d reduced all the shipwrights who could’ve built or repaired ships into meatballs, and the Swarm didn’t know how to build them. Building a fleet to patrol the shores wasn’t a feasible option.

Even if we *could* manage it somehow, the only one among us with some knowledge of how to mobilize a fleet was Roland. The rest of the Swarm had learned how to handle a ship from him, but there was no point in trying to get them to absorb the knowledge of how to command an entire fleet.

The Arachnea was a land-based force—a fundamentally different kind of army. I didn’t feel it was necessary for us to engage in naval warfare. My only experience with controlling aquatic or naval units came from times I’d dabbled in other factions. These experiments hadn’t resulted in much success; my win-loss ratio was always dreadful compared to when I played with the Arachnea.

In other words, I was completely unskilled when it came to naval combat.

“What shall we do, Your Majesty?” asked the Ripper Swarm.

“We’ll have the Worker Swarms erect Eyeball Spires along the coastal towns and station reserve forces there. That should keep them in check.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. By your will.” The Ripper Swarm performed its gesture of loyalty and scuttled away.

“Can you swim, Sérignan?”

“Me, swim? No, I cannot. My apologies, Your Majesty...”

“I’m not blaming you, just asking.”

The Swarm were no good when it came to traversing water, and Sérignan was no exception.

“It’s such a waste, though. We’ve conquered these pretty shores, and we can’t even go for a swim.”

Schtraut’s seas were a lovely shade of sapphire blue, and it looked like they’d be a delight to swim in. Plus, it was the middle of summer, so I really felt like taking a dip.

Is that childish of me, I wonder?

“Do you want to go swimming, Your Majesty?”

“Yeah, it’d be a nice change of pace. I know now’s not the time for that, though.”

“If that is your desire, Your Majesty, we may swim,” Sérignan said. “You have been working so hard all this time; you certainly deserve some rest. By all means, go ahead and swim.”

“You’re surprisingly gung-ho about it, considering you yourself can’t swim. Are you sure?”

Will she really have fun going with me if she can’t swim?

“My enjoyment is not a factor here. I merely advised that you rest because I feel it is necessary, Your Majesty. You look quite tired, and you collapsed several times during the war over the Dukedom. I believe that calls for some repose.”

She wasn’t wrong; I *had* been rather tired as of late. Maluk’s massacre was one thing, but the many deaths in Schtraut weighed heavily upon me. Had things played out a bit differently, the people we killed might have been our allies, and that made me feel like I’d lost a friend.

“You must never forget your human heart.”

I remembered the words someone had told me. It was then that I realized I still possessed my human heart... and that was why I grieved for the people of Schtraut.

Emotional burdens aside, I’d been fighting nonstop, and I had even been

poisoned—twice! It was only natural I'd be exhausted by this point, even if I hadn't noticed it creeping up on me.

One look in the mirror made it apparent that my already thin body was even skinnier than before. Maybe Sérignan was right, and I needed a change of pace.

"All right, let's go swimming, then. And since you can't swim, we can throw a barbecue, too. We'll play at the beach, and we can go back to work after that. I don't think the enemy will attack us again so soon, and if they do, we'll just crush them into paste."

"By your will, Your Majesty. We will begin preparations."

A dip in the ocean, huh?

It'd been two or three years since I last went swimming. I was worried I might get sunburned, but that was a minor concern. Right now, I wanted to play around and enjoy myself before I had to return to the savage world of war.



Soon enough, we found ourselves at the beach. The sparkling blue water showed no trace of monsters. This, along with the beautiful white dunes, made the whole thing the very picture of a coastal resort. I could never have gone to a beach like this back in my world.

"The ocean is sooo pretty!" Lysa exclaimed.

"Indeed. It's a shame we can't swim," Roland said with a nod.

I was escorted by some Ripper Swarms and Masquerade Swarms, as well as Lysa, Sérignan, and Roland.

"Why are you hiding back there, Sérignan?" I called out to her. "Don't be shy; come look at the sea."

"B-But, my attire, it's..." Fidgeting, she peeked out from behind the rocks.

Sérignan's bathing suit was a rather bold bikini I'd asked the Worker Swarms to make. The white fabric complemented her pale skin and made her look very much like a mature woman. At least in terms of her figure, if nothing else.

Meanwhile, Lysa and I were in one-piece swimsuits, also courtesy of the

Worker Swarms. Mine wasn't showy, but Lysa's exposed her back in case her Mimesis wore off and her wings appeared.

"C'mon, you look good in it, Sérignan. You're the only one in our group who could get away with wearing something like that, anyway, so be proud of what you've got."

"Erm, by your will, Your Majesty..." With that, she dragged herself over to us.

"All right, Lysa and I are going to go swimming. You and Roland can hang back and enjoy your barbecue."

"Perish the thought, Your Majesty! I cannot eat before you've had the first bite!"

You can be a real stick-in-the-mud, Sérignan... But I guess that's part of what makes you so cute.

"Fine, you can eat later, then. Let's go, Lysa!"

"Roger that!"

Lysa and I approached the water, dipping our feet into the receding waves.

"Ooh, it's nice and cool!" she cried.

"This is your first time at the beach, right? Having fun?"

The two of us started splashing around, the water reaching up to our waists.

"Yes! I wish I could show this to Linnet..."

"Yeah... Right."

Lysa's feelings for Linnet hadn't waned in the slightest. Linnet's death was also the first of anyone I held dear. His death had driven me to destroy the Kingdom of Maluk and brought us to where we were today. It had also been a major turning point for Lysa.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I asked her. "You've been away from the elven village for so long. You must be getting homesick."

"No, I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. "At first, walking around towns and other places so far away from the forest made me anxious, but having you and Sérignan with me helped a great deal."

You're such a brave girl, Lysa.

I, myself, was a bit homesick. I wondered how my parents were doing, what my friends were up to, and how things were going in the game... But no, I'd come to the beach to let those thoughts get washed away. I shook them off and tried to concentrate on having a good time.

"Can you swim, Lysa?"

"Yeah, I used to go swimming in the river every now and then."

"Then let's race. First one to get to that reef over there wins!"

With that, I began swimming rapidly toward the reef, with Lysa taking off after me in a hurry. Swimming was simply delicious, and I felt on top of the world. The contrast between the warm sunlight and the cold water filled my body with energy. All the exhaustion that had built up within me melted away.

"Aaah!" My head broke the surface, and I found I'd reached the reef first.

I won!

"You're fast, Your Majesty!" Lysa exclaimed as she caught up to me.

"How do you like them apples?" I said, puffing out my (lacking) chest. "All right, let's head back and have something to eat. You must be hungry."

"Mm, not really."

"Oh, right. You guys don't eat."

The Swarm had no need for food, though they could enjoy the flavor.

"Well, that's fine. At the very least, it should taste good, so you can enjoy that much." On that note, the two of us swam back to shore.

"How was your swim, Your Majesty?" Sérignan asked upon my return.

"It was fun. I just wish you could try it, too."

"Oh, no. I'm afraid swimming is beyond me... Anyway, the barbecue has been prepared. Over here, Your Majesty."

Sérignan insisted she couldn't swim, but I thought that it would probably be possible if she used her Mimesis.

“What a feast,” I blurted, slightly surprised.

Our barbecue looked like a big party spread out over the entire beach. The smell of burning charcoal filled the air, whetting my appetite. The only thing missing was the aroma of roasting meat.

“Masquerade Swarm, Ripper Swarm, you guys join in.”

“We will if that is what you desire, but it may hamper our vigil.”

“I don’t mind. The only ones who’d come here are pirates, anyway.”

Right, the pirates. Where had they come from? Did they have some hideout nearby where they stashed all their booty? I assumed they probably had a black flag with a skull on it.

In my mind, pirates were practically fairy-tale characters. I’d seen stories in the news about how pirates were a problem in Somalia, but I’d never heard about them being a threat in Japan.

Still, pirates felt like an aging concept that belonged in the realm of folklore: savage, gallant, and reckless men of the sea who built mountains of treasure, hid in secret fortresses, and fought with cutlasses. That was how I pictured them.

“Anyway, let’s cook some meat,” I declared, brushing off that thought.

“Here you are, Your Majesty. The skewers are ready.”

Roland and the Masquerade Swarms had skewered meat and vegetables together. We placed a mesh grill grate over the fire and laid the skewers on top. Soon enough, a mouthwatering fragrance wafted through the air.

“Are they about done?” I wondered aloud, picking one up. I topped it with a little homemade barbecue sauce and took a bite. “Mmm... Delicious. Aaah, a barbecue on a beautiful beach... What bliss.”

For a moment, I could forget about all the fighting.

“You guys should have some too,” I added.

“I shall give it a try.” Sérignan helped herself now that I’d already had some.

The Swarm didn’t need food, but Sérignan, Lysa, and Roland were all

originally human and thus capable of experiencing and appreciating flavor. Sérignan loved eating meat, and she was hardly picky.

That's a good girl.

"Well? Do you like it?"

"Yes! It is delectable!"

Despite being a Swarm, Sérignan really loved to eat. Watching her, I remembered when she'd happily devoured the sandwiches I'd made a while back. It made me want to feed her all sorts of dishes. That was the least I could do for this diligent knight who fought in my name.

"And what about you, Lysa?"

"Yup, it's good. Also, it's really a whole different experience eating in a place like this."

I'd originally thought Lysa and the elves would be opposed to eating meat, but it turned out that this world's elves had no problem with it at all. When I visited their village, they often shared their preserved meat with me. They were forbidden from hunting down more meat than they could eat, though, as part of their belief in coexisting with nature.

Elves really were one with nature in a way that was completely foreign to people living in other societies. I really couldn't fathom why a peaceful, wholesome race such as theirs was viewed as a savage tribe. They were content with just living in the forest, and they didn't wish for anything more than that.

"This kind of food isn't out of the ordinary for you, right, Roland?" I asked, turning toward him.

"No, but eating on the beach is new to me."

Roland was originally a noble, so he was accustomed to fancy cuisine, but even he wasn't used to having a barbecue on the beach. I was a little taken aback.

"Now, the problem lies in this very sea..." I muttered.

I had come here to keep my mind off the war, but my thoughts drifted there all on their own.

“How many ships do we have?”

“We have one large sailing ship, two medium-sized ones, and about ten merchant ships that aren’t suited for the open sea,” Roland replied.

Many of our usable ships had been damaged or sunk when we landed in Doris, leaving us with only a handful of serviceable crafts. We only had three ships capable of moving freely about the ocean, which meant searching for the pirates in these vast waters was effectively impossible.

“Can’t the Worker Swarms build a ship?” Lysa asked.

“They don’t have any knowledge when it comes to shipbuilding, so I don’t think they’d be able to.”

Even the Worker Swarms, as skilled as they were, couldn’t get us out of this one. I spent some time racking my brains for a solution.

“I think I have an idea,” I said at last.

Fundamentally, we just needed to conquer the pirate stronghold. Doing so, I realized, would be much more straightforward than I’d originally thought.

“All right, let’s eat. Once we’re done cleaning up here, we’ll get to work on our plans for those pirates.”

We couldn’t sit by and let them raid our resources all the time. I needed them to quiet down and behave... and perhaps we could further secure our shores in the process.

Spoils of the Raid

“The Albatross is returning to port! That lady pirate Isabelle’s back!”

A medium-sized ship was sailing into Atlantica, the pirate haven. It was the Albatross—the galleon under the ownership of Isabelle Ismael, a pirate of Atlantica. She’d often used her ship to attack vessels from the Popedom and the Dukedom, stripping them of their riches before hauling the booty back to Atlantica.

The winds carried the ship through Atlantica’s hidden entrance. It was a small grotto hidden between two reefs—a passage no one would know how to find unless they were familiar with nautical charts of the area.

After sailing into the small cave, the Albatross dropped anchor beside a secret wharf used only by the pirates. A group of them rushed over to welcome the incoming ship.

“So, how did things look in Schtraut?!” one of them asked.

“The place is crawlin’ with goddamn monsters!” a member of the Albatross’ crew shouted back.

“All right, ya bastards, haul down the goods!” Isabelle exclaimed.

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

Her crew began carrying the goods they’d stolen from Schtraut out of the Albatross’ hold and onto the wharf.

Isabelle was still in her early twenties, but she boasted as many scars as most of her older comrades. Many pirates had eyepatches and artificial limbs, and Isabelle was no exception—she had an eyepatch over her left eye. This wound was proof that she had seen more than a few battles in her lifetime.

A child of two pirates, Isabelle was orphaned at the age of twelve after her parents had a vicious feud over some loot. Her career as a pirate began with sweeping decks, but she soon learned how to help navigate the ship and

became an official member of the crew.

Since then, she had fought naval forces from both Schtraut and Frantz many times. She'd clawed her way up to the post of captain with her skills and a hearty helping of pluck. Once she'd obtained her own ship, she gathered a crew of dependable subordinates and began mingling with Atlantica's other pirate captains.

Female pirates weren't a common sight in Atlantica, but her short, crimson hair gave her a fiery, masculine impression. Coupled with the savage, uninhibited lust most pirates openly expressed, this made her a worthy match for any male pirate.

Anyone who *did* look down on her for being a woman got a good, hard taste of her cutlass. Her list of victims wasn't limited to foreign naval officers; any one of her fellow pirates were equally liable to die at her hand if they didn't show her proper respect.

She may have been a woman, but she was by no means a fair flower. Isabelle was more akin to a savage predator willing to slaughter its prey without mercy.

"Oooh! Ya got this much after jus' one raid? Good work!" one pirate exclaimed, surprised by the sheer amount of spoils.

Among the loot were silver candlesticks and utensils, several different types of coins, and a number of assorted gemstones. The onlooking pirates were abuzz with excitement as they watched the plunder get stuffed into chests and carried off.

Normally, it would take months of pillaging to gather this much treasure. Piracy wasn't easy work, as it required long waits between ambushes. Pirates didn't often attack ports because they were protected by armies, so they usually had to target trade ships sailing solo.

Learning where and when ships like that might appear was easier said than done. Sometimes the pirates had to spend months out at sea, staving off hunger with hard and rotten food. Evading naval assaults and chasing down ships full of treasure were far from easy.

"Looks like you made a killing, eh, Isabelle?"

One man eyed the treasure with lustful eyes: Blasco Bartoli, Achille Alessandri's right-hand man and second-in-command here in Atlantica. Surrounded by his lackeys, Blasco approached Isabelle's loot as it was being carried off. Their expressions were all clouded over with greed as they gaped at it like hungry sharks.

"But, ah, we'll be claimin' this half in the name of Atlantica," Blasco said, prompting his subordinates to shoo away the crew and grab hold of the chests.

"Huh?! What the hell?! Atlantica's tax is only supposed to be a tenth of what I find! When did you decide to knock it up to half?!" Isabelle barked.

"Geronimo 'n' Mauro went after you," he replied, inspecting the treasure carefully. "Geronimo's ship got attacked by a sea serpent, and now he's at the bottom o' the sea. Mauro barely got away with his life. Dont'cha feel bad for 'im? Your bright idea of raidin' got somebody killed."

"I don't give two shits about that! I went through the same kind of danger to pull off this raid, and everyone else knew what they were getting into!"

"It's all fer one and one fer all out here, li'l lady. I'm your superior, and if you ignore me orders, you're gonna have to beat it. Your tax is half o' what ya got this time. We gotta pay for Geronimo's funeral and fixin' Mauro's ship."

"Shit! Who do you think you are?!"

"C'mon, ma'am, just forget it," one of Isabelle's men said coaxingly. "Let them take their half. I'm sure the rest of the crew is angry, too. It's not like we didn't get hurt trying to get this loot either."

"We don't have a choice," another shipmate added. "We can't keep working as pirates if they kick us out of Atlantica. Frantz's navy will catch us, and we'll be fish food before we know it. Better just give up half our loot instead... Curse that bastard!"

"Listen, we put ourselves in danger for this," Isabelle huffed. "Schtraut's navy is kaput, and we can take anything we want, but those freakin' bugs keep crawling outta the woodwork. A cutlass doesn't do anything against those things. You need at least a crossbow."

Isabelle and her men had encountered and fought Ripper Swarms guarding

the port towns. Her crewmates had tried to fend off the attacking Ripper Swarms with their cutlasses, but the blades did nothing to harm them. The pirates had only managed to defeat them with crossbows and a large hammer they'd used to break into the nearby storehouse. Even then, they had lost a few men in the skirmish.

"It's gonna be a big race now. All the pirates in this joint are gonna try raidin' Schtraut's port towns. Here I thought we'd make it big if we went out there first... But then that bastard Blasco came and pulled this shit on us. I hope those goddamn man-eating bugs tear him to shreds."

Now that the pirates knew Schtraut's port towns were easy pickings, they'd likely rush out in droves to get a piece of the pie. However, the Dukedom only had so many resources. The country was in ruins, and its economy had come to a screeching halt, so the pirates couldn't keep raiding it indefinitely. This made it a first-come, first-served pillaging race.

Knowing this would happen, Isabelle had made sure she would be the first to land so she could make a killing in one go, but then Blasco had taken half the loot from her. It was impossible not to get angry. She had gone out there and braved an unknown threat while Blasco stayed behind, safe and sound. How could he get half of what she had? A dark rage swirled in her heart as Blasco's underlings hauled the treasure away.

"Hey, Isabelle."

"Huh, it's you, Achille. What, you come to swipe even more booty right from under my nose?"

"No, I just thought you might be upset. I warned Blasco that if he tried to take that much, you might pull out your cutlass and slice off his head. Yet he still went ahead and took half... Heh, what am I gonna do with him?"

"Yeah, that's right. Take that stuff back from him, old man. Geronimo and Mauro might've gotten into trouble out there, but we had to stick our necks out for this, too."

"No, that's not possible," Achille said, shaking his head. "He's right in that we need to pay for Geronimo's funeral and Mauro's ship, and you're the one who made the most, Isabelle. Atlantica's pirates stand as one; we survive by helping

each other out. If your ship were to get wrecked, we'd pay to have it fixed just the same. Just give it a rest. On this island, we all chip in."

"Can't say I ever saw you or Blasco pay for somebody's funeral or ship repairs, old pal. It's only ever the little guys who pay for that—like me. You bigshots are always too busy sittin' pretty and rakin' in other people's profits."

Atlantica's pirate colony was, on the surface, a cooperative organization; the members helped one another pillage and gather resources. However, Achille and Blasco took a cut out of everyone's earnings while not sharing any of their own. They paid when a pirate got hurt or a ship was damaged, but it all came from the taxes pirates like Isabelle had to pay. On top of that, the money these leaders provided usually wasn't free of charge; it came in the form of a loan with interest.

Isabelle certainly wasn't the only pirate displeased about this. The other pirates all harbored resentment toward this oppressive system. While the quantity of loot was going up, they weren't actually *seeing* much more of it. Everyone from the most seasoned captain to the lowest deck scrubber was gradually becoming more bitter about this state of affairs.

"I'm telling you to just let it go, so do as I say," Achille said firmly. "I am the leader here."

"That right? Fine. Whatever." Isabelle shrugged.

"Good, good. Do as you're told, and you'll be fine. Work hard for Atlantica, Isabelle." With a smirk, Achille walked off.

"Irritatin' bastard..." she spat.

"Got a sec, Isabelle?"

"What do you want, Gilbert? You want to take some of my loot, too?"

The man who'd walked up to her was another pirate who was roughly her age.

Gilbert shook his head. "I heard you went to Schtraut. How was it?"

"Oh, yeah. It was kinda dangerous, but there's definitely a profit to be made. Assumin' the people in charge don't steal it from you, that is."

“Dangerous, you say? What, were there sea serpents out there?”

“Nah, there were monsters on the shore. Spider-like buggers. Never seen anything like ‘em. I hate bugs, y’see? They gimme the heebie-jeebies.”

Isabelle and her pirates didn’t really know anything about the Swarm. They had no idea these creatures were the ones that had destroyed Schtraut or that they were the enemies of the entire world... as well as the owners of the loot they’d stolen.

Despite being a seasoned veteran, Isabelle had one major weakness: she had always hated bugs. When she was a little girl, she couldn’t even bring herself to touch a wharf roach. Boys her age, like Gilbert, had always teased her for it.

“Right... That aside, we’ve been losing a lot of men to sea serpents lately. Achille and Blasco are trying to find a solution. It might just be their breeding season, but those sea serpents have been acting differently than usual. Wonder what their deal is.”

“Hah, bold of you to assume those vultures can solve our problems. The only thing on their minds is taking a cut of our profits.”

Sea serpents were monsters many considered to be the rulers of the sea. Adult sea serpents could grow up to 30 meters long, and they could easily sink ships by attacking them from underwater. No ship was safe, whether it carried civilians or pirates.

“Don’t be like that. They lent me money after my ship took a nasty hit. Thanks to that, I can keep working.”

“Hmph. They take away our money just so they can lend it back to us and earn more off the interest. They’re just a bunch of rotten snakes.” Isabelle was still livid.

“Well, all I’m saying is they might send you out to help deal with the sea serpents, so keep that in mind. And hey, if we catch a really big one, we’ll have a huge feast. Err, if they get the better of us, we’ll probably end up as dinner instead. Gotta love being a pirate, you know? Won’t find a more dangerous job no matter how hard you look.”

“Yeah, thanks. Maybe I’ll go get some more stuff from Schtraut before they

rope me into slaying the sea serpents. Just hope no one takes a cut of that, too.”

With that, Isabelle parted ways with Gilbert. With the anger clouding her mind, Isabelle would soon forget Gilbert’s words about the sea serpents altogether.



“Preparations are complete, Your Majesty.”

“Thanks, Roland. I leave command of the navy in your hands.”

I gathered all of the Arachnea’s serviceable vessels on the outskirts of Doris, the Dukedom’s former capital. The ships were operated by Ripper Swarms, and they were chock-full of them. There was one large sailing ship that could weather the open ocean at full speed and two medium-sized ships to accompany it.

“All right, so we need to figure out which spot’s gonna get attacked next,” I said, rolling out a map on the table.

There were five large port towns in Schtraut. One spot had already been attacked, but I had still set up my mousetraps along all five. There was also a chance the enemy might attack a small fishing village, but I didn’t care so much about those, as they weren’t housing my resources.

“You think they’ll fall for it?” Lysa asked anxiously.

“I sure hope so, since we don’t have any other way,” I replied, looking down at the map.

All we could do was pray that it worked. There was no telling when or where the pirates or Frantz’s navy might attack. Our strategy involved concentrating the Swarms on the front lines, but Schtraut’s coasts were too vast for us to station all of them effectively. We had been made well aware of the now-obvious fact that mankind could traverse deep waters, and that meant we needed to secure our border with Nyrnal along the Themel River, too.

Nyrnal could cross the Themel to attack us, while Frantz might sail in from the sea. That would be the worst-case scenario. We’d be forced to retreat and set a

defensive perimeter around our base at the elven forest.

For now, the Empire of Nyrnal wasn't showing any signs of moving in on us, so our defense of the Themel wasn't as tight. Having chosen to fight alone, Nyrnal was just as worthy of the alliance's aggression as we were. I already knew that the Empire's penchant for dominance created friction between it and the surrounding countries. If the Popedom's allied army were to change course and begin something like a crusade, it could very well opt to attack Nyrnal.

They're just as disliked as we are, I guess, I thought to myself. Or maybe it's the other way around?

Still, we prepared ourselves for the worst, however slight the chances.

"We can't fall back if we're to achieve our victory. We have to keep our occupied territory firmly under our control; we must protect both land and sea."

Losing territory meant losing resources. The Swarm's strength lay in numbers, and letting those numbers diminish would be fatal. If I wanted to keep up our production of Swarms, we'd need to keep expanding. Retreat wasn't an option.

"If we can just handle the pirates..."

A part of my operation hinged on the pirates' movements. I thought we might be able to use them to stop Frantz's army from mobilizing, which would allow us to focus on our terrestrial efforts and give us the chance we needed to grow.

Assuming everything goes well, that is.

"Any plan you come up with is bound to succeed, Your Majesty. We will win this time, just as we have won every other battle so far. We have nothing to worry about."

"I hope so, Sérignan. But I'm a worrywart and a coward. Thinking about what's going to happen next makes me anxious."

Would the Swarm grow and grow, eventually enveloping the entire continent? Or would they learn to live in peace with the humans of this land and come to stop expanding of their own volition?

At present, I couldn't tell. Even though I was the leader of the Arachnea, I

couldn't see how I would end the war.

"Your Majesty, a suspicious ship is approaching one of our port towns," Roland said, whisking me away from my thoughts.

"All right. Begin the operation."

Right. Time to focus on the battle at hand. If we can't win this battle, conquering the continent is a pipe dream. Glory to the Arachnea.



The Albatross closed in on yet another port town, intending to clean out its stores.

"C'mon! Sweep away those bugs, and grab all the treasure!"

Isabelle's pirates disembarked the ship and rowed to shore on small boats. Four Ripper Swarms appeared but, being outnumbered, were forced into a hasty retreat. The Worker Swarms had already evacuated.

The port town was completely deserted, and there was nothing to get in the way of the pirates' charge. In the past, Schtraut's soldiers would have rushed to stop them, but the Dukedom of Schtraut had been destroyed. The only ones still in this town were the strange, insectile monsters. Perhaps the bugs had learned to fear people since they were now fleeing the pirates.

"Hah! The buggers are afraid of us!"

"Run off and never show yer ugly mugs again!"

After jeering at the fleeing monsters, the pirates broke open the door to one of the storehouses. They stormed inside, hoping to pick it clean. One man pried off the lid of the crate, peering inside to get a look at its contents...

"Huh?!"

It only took a single moment. Something leapt out from within the crate, dove into the unfortunate pirate's mouth, and latched on to his throat.

"Hey, did something happen?" asked one of his comrades, running over to check on him.

"Nothing... happened," the pirate replied in an awkward, unsteady tone. With

stiff movements, he closed the crate's lid.

"All right, then let's take this stuff back. I'm sure Isabelle's gonna be through the roof when she sees how much we got. I just hope those assholes don't take half of it away again this time..."

"Yes. You're... right."

The second pirate eyed his friend suspiciously as he picked up the crate and carried it back to their boat. The loot would then be rowed across the water and onto the pirate vessel, which had already made preparations to depart.

Just like the Arachnea, the pirates placed importance on speed. They always stole from their foes and quickly retreated before a navy could show up to apprehend them.

The second pirate loaded the wooden crate onto the boat and pushed off, leaving the stripped storehouse behind.

None of the other pirates had noticed that there were over 50 Ripper Swarms lying in wait in this town. That the Eyeball Spires were there but, for whatever reason, weren't attacking them. That one suspicious man in their ranks seemed to be looking around a bit too often.

And that they had been completely and utterly caught in a trap.



"All right, I know their position. They should be right about here," I said, glancing over Schtraut's sea charts. At the moment, I was speaking with Roland in the late duke's estate in Doris.

I had been tracing the pirate ship's route on the documents. The pirates always went out of their way to make a hasty escape after a raid, but thanks to the Parasite Swarms, I'd been able to track them all this time. I hid Parasite Swarms inside crates in the storehouses, as I knew that the pirates would open them to confirm the spoils of their raids. Now that the Parasite Swarms had infected a couple of pirates, they were constantly updating us on their location via the collective consciousness.

"Are we ready to attack?"

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Roland said. He was the commander of our little navy. “They have one ship, while we have three. Our victory is assured.”

“Okay, just don’t be too hasty and accidentally sink the ship,” I warned him. “And don’t kill the crew either. Our goal here isn’t a straightforward defeat—we need to find their hideout and entice them to negotiate with us.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

No matter how hard we tried, the most we could accomplish was sink a single pirate ship. However optimistic I might have been, I seriously doubted the pirates had only one ship. Besides, Frantz’s navy was still a looming threat.

“I’m counting on you, Roland.”

If Roland sets out right this instant, he should be able to catch up to the enemy before they pass Doris completely. Our biggest ship might be a bit too slow to make it, but the medium-sized vessels should do. He can surround the pirate ship with these two in a pincer maneuver, then ram it with our larger one.

Admittedly, I was never very good at naval combat in the game, since I seldom had to bother with it. Still, I believe things will go according to plan.

“Hmm...”

While I was thinking about the operation, Sérignan was grumbling to herself with a bitter expression on her face.

“What’s up, sport? Why the long face?”

“It’s nothing, really... I couldn’t help but think about how useless I am in this battle. Normally, I would charge the pirate ship alongside Roland and help him subdue the enemy.”

“You wanna hurry over and join him right now?”

What a responsible lady. I, on the other hand, am thrilled I have a little bit less work to do.

“May I?”

“Knock yourself out. Just keep in mind that I didn’t put you on this mission because you can’t swim. Are you gonna be all right on that front?”

“I will be just fine, Your Majesty!” she chirped, eyes sparkling.

“Well, okay then. I’ll give Roland the order, so go meet up with him.”

I contacted Roland through the collective consciousness; thankfully, he and his fleet hadn’t sailed away quite yet. I was already feeling confident about our operation with just Roland and the Ripper Swarms involved, but with Sérignan joining the fray, our victory was set in stone. There was absolutely nothing to worry about!

However, I secretly hoped Sérignan wouldn’t end up slipping off the deck and drowning.



“Sis! We got two ships comin’ in hot! Two... No, three of ’em!” cried a member of the Albatross’ crew.

“What? I thought Schtraut’s navy was gone!” Isabelle hurriedly snatched a pair of binoculars from the lookout’s hands.

Indeed, two medium-sized sailing ships were tailing the Albatross, followed by a third, larger ship. Onboard all of them were countless giant insects.

“Well, shit. Those bug things can commandeer ships?”

Isabelle had thought the bugs were mindless monsters; she never imagined they might be capable of doing something as advanced as handling a ship. If these creatures were somehow responsible for the destruction of the Dukedom, however, it would’ve surely been because of their sheer numbers.

Despite the fact that the Dukedom of Schtraut was supposed to be deserted, these three ships were giving chase to the Albatross just off Doris’ shores. One of them was even moving ahead to block their path.

“Are those ships really being operated by bugs? How did they even know we were here?!” shouted one of the pirates.

“Hell if I know,” Isabelle said bitterly. “But I can tell you one thing. If we don’t fight back, they’ll take the loot we stole, and we’ll be killed, just like everybody else in Schtraut.”

It was a critical situation. If those ships really *were* steered by the bug

monsters, that meant this incoming navy wasn't made up of soldiers, but the creatures that had massacred the people of Schtraut.

The pirates had only barely pushed them back during their encounters in the port towns, and Isabelle didn't know how things would end if they were to fight them on deck. Naval battles in this world were based on who boarded whose ship. Troops would move from their own ship to take over an enemy vessel. Cannons hadn't been invented yet, so boarding was the only proper way to fight it out... and the image of those bugs boarding her ship was a nightmarish one.

"For now, focus on shakin' 'em off. If that fails, well, get ready to fight 'em on board."

"Aye aye, ma'am!"

The Albatross spread out its sails and picked up speed, trying to evade the vessels behind it. However, it seemed the wind's bearing wasn't in the pirates' favor; the Schtraut ships came in closer and closer. It was only a matter of time until the Albatross would be within the enemy's reach.

And soon enough, the Dukedom's ships caught up.

"They're gonna ram into us!"

"All hands on deck! Prepare for enemy boarding! Make sure you've got some crossbows!" Isabelle shouted.

The pirates grabbed their weapons, with some taking up cutlasses and others picking up hammers and crossbows.

"Here they come!"

"Brace for impact!"

As the enemy ships ran right alongside them, Ripper Swarms leapt from them and landed on the Albatross' deck.

"Fight back! Push them away!" Isabelle ordered.

Heeding their captain's call, the pirates rushed in to engage the Ripper Swarms. The cutlasses dealt no damage, and the constant undulation of the ship caused many of their blows to miss the mark. Even those wielding

crossbows failed to hit their agile opponents and had to waste time reloading.

“Whoa!”

As the pirates floundered to right themselves and reload, the Ripper Swarms swooped in. Rather than going in for the kill, they used their paralyzing stingers to attack. They swung their scythes only to fend off attacks, taking care not to deliver lethal blows. Pirates who’d been stung fell to the deck, unable to move, and the Ripper Swarms fired threads to tie them up tight.

“Don’t fall back! I dunno why, but they’re goin’ easy on us! Go at ’em with all you got!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

While the cutlasses didn’t pierce the Swarms, they did keep the creatures occupied. Meanwhile, the pirates wielding hammers and crossbows finally managed to hit their targets. They huddled together in one place, riddling any Swarm that dared to approach them with bolts.

Just then, however...

“Haaaah!”

A woman and a man raised their voices in one terrifying war cry.

“More enemies?! Aww, crap!”

“Prepare yourselves, pirates!”

It was Roland and Sérignan.

They cut through the cluster of pirates and broke through their formation. Their attacks were precise even on such unsteady ground, and they took care to deal nonlethal blows as they gradually incapacitated the pirate crew.

“Come forth, pirates! All hail the queen!” Sérignan exclaimed as she knocked out a pirate.

“All hail the queen!” echoed a Ripper Swarm, tying up another.

“Dammit!” Isabelle cursed under her breath.

Before long, there were only five pirates left who could still fight back. The Swarms, on the other end, were mostly unharmed. It was hopeless; there was

no way the pirates could win.

“Keep going, men! Put your backs into it! We ain’t gonna let the Albatross sink that easy!”

“You got it, ma’am!”

The remaining pirates gripped their hammers, facing off against the Ripper Swarms closing in around them.

“You still intend to fight? We are trying not to shed any needless blood,” Sérignan said, stepping forward.

“Don’t look down on us, monsters!” spat one of the pirates as he raised his hammer.

“Haaah!”

Sérignan swung her blade down, striking not at the pirate but at the weapon he was holding. Her sword sliced through the hammer as if it were paper, splitting it in two.

“Eek!”

Rendered impotent, the pirate lost balance and fell on his backside. A Ripper Swarm promptly stung him and tangled him up in a bundle of threads.

“We can’t beat them, Sis! We should just surrender!” croaked a member of the crew.

“Do you even hear yourself?!” Isabelle snapped at him. “They’re monsters! They ain’t gonna let us surrender!”

“We are willing to take prisoners,” Sérignan said. “Our queen is generous and merciful. Her will is for you to kneel before her, and should you do so, she will forgive your raids of our stores. Come, pirates. Cast aside your weapons and submit. Any further resistance is futile.”

Sérignan held up her blade, and Roland did the same.

“Stop making fun of me, you... you *bugs*!” Isabelle bellowed. “You think the great pirate Isabelle would kneel before someone else?! I’ll show you!”

Isabelle then broke the formation and dashed toward Sérignan, attempting to

slash at her.

“Too slow.”

Sérignan easily avoided Isabelle’s attack and bashed the handle of her sword against the pirate’s back. Isabelle let out a guttural grunt and sank to the ground, where she lay still. The Ripper Swarms quickly bound her with their threads.

“They got her!”

“It’s all over now...”

The remaining pirates were overcome with despair.

“Disarm yourselves and surrender,” Roland said, pointing his blade at them. “If you do, we won’t take your lives.”

“I-I give in!”

“I surrender!”

The sight of their leader’s swift defeat had taken all the wind out of their sails, and the pirates scrambled to surrender. They were quickly tied up as well.

“I believe we’re finished here.” Sérignan looked around and nodded with satisfaction.

“That we are, Miss Sérignan. We should inform Her Majesty of our victory.”

They’d successfully taken over the pirate ship without killing a single member of the crew.

“Her Majesty is already aware of everything. The Swarm is always connected through the collective consciousness.”

Even as this exchange took place, the Ripper Swarms were changing the ships’ course, setting them to return to Doris. Having learned how to operate the ships through the collective consciousness, their handling of the crafts was perfect, and the ships smoothly made their way back around.

But just then...

“Something’s coming,” Sérignan hissed, drawing her sword.

“Yes, I noticed.” Roland braced himself, his blade at the ready.

Suddenly, the seawater swelled, and something lunged at one of the medium-sized ships. It was a monster that resembled a colossal sea snake, well over 50 meters long. The beast coiled its body around the ship, constricting it so tightly that the wooden frame groaned and began to break under the strain. Ripper Swarms were thrown off the deck, and they fell helplessly into the ocean.

Once it had sunk the ship, the monster dove back underwater.

“What was that?” Sérignan asked in a quivering voice.

“A sea serpent,” Roland replied, beads of cold sweat sliding down his cheeks. “Though it’s the first time I’ve seen one this large...”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to resist if that thing attacks us. What shall we do?”

“We must fight. That is our duty.”

“A fine answer, Roland. Besides, I don’t think it will be able to sink this one.”

“Why wouldn’t it be able to?”

“The Ripper Swarms.” Sérignan jerked her chin in the direction of the surging water, where the sea serpent was once again rising above the surface.

This time, however, Ripper Swarms were clinging to its body, stabbing it with their paralyzing stingers. Thanks to that, its movements were growing ever more sluggish.

“It’s coming this way!”

“Right!”

The sea serpent encroached upon the Albatross, determined to destroy it. Roland and Sérignan split up and drove their swords into the beast’s body. Tormented by their attacks, the sea serpent screeched in pain and retreated back into the water.

“We did it,” said Roland.

“Yes, though I would have liked to finish it off,” Sérignan mumbled.

Unbeknownst to them, that very sea serpent would go on to become a major

nuisance down the line.



“So, you guys are pirates, huh? Well, I’m sorry my friends had to rough you up like this, but think of it as recompense for the goods you stole from me.”

I was speaking to the pirates’ leader, Isabelle, as she glared at me with a sullen expression. She was bound tightly by the Ripper Swarms’ threads, so sulking was the only form of resistance she had.

“Now, there’s something I’d like to ask you. Where exactly is your hideout?” I asked.

“Tch. You think I’d tell you?” Isabelle spat.

“Well, aren’t you belligerent? I really want us to get along, too.” I shrugged and beckoned to one of the pirates. “Hey there, Blackbeard. How are you feeling?”

“I feel... splendid... Your Majesty,” the pirate replied.

He was infected with a Parasite Swarm, but obviously Isabelle didn’t know that. Eyes wide, she gaped at the man who should have been her loyal subordinate.

“Wh-What the hell did you do to my crew?!”

“Oh, don’t worry. I just had him swallow a bug,” I said casually. “Look, I’ll have him cough it up now.”

I ordered the Parasite Swarm to depart, and the color gradually drained from Isabelle’s face as it crawled out of his mouth. It was pretty funny, actually.

“I can use these Parasite Swarms to turn anyone into my own little marionette. See, I could put one of these inside you and get you to tell me... Or I could have you order one of your crewmates to do it. You follow?” I smiled viciously.

“Shit! See, this is why I can’t stand bugs!” Isabelle squeaked, her gaze fixed on the Parasite Swarm squirming around in my hand.

She was wary of it, as if she feared it might lunge at her at any second. The

severity of her reaction gave me a ticklish desire to keep toying with her.

Oh, no. The Swarm's will is taking over again.

"Anyway, spill the beans. You can do it voluntarily, or I can make you talk with my little friend here. Your choice." I held up the Parasite Swarm.

"Stop! I'll talk! I'll talk, so put that thing away!"

Huh. A daring pirate is afraid of bugs?

"Then tell me. I have the sea chart right here, so where's the hideout?" I asked, undoing the threads around her hands.

"There," she replied, pointing. "That's it right there. It's called Atlantica."

Hmm. This island isn't on the charts, but it's off the Popedom's shores. Awfully convenient...

"All right, one more question, then. Would you like to join forces with the Arachnea?"

"Huh? You want to team up with us?" Isabelle looked at me in disbelief.

"Genuinely. I'm in no mood to joke about something like that. I need naval forces, and unfortunately, my own navy is pretty weak. We can barely keep you pirates at bay, so what are we going to do when we go to war with Frantz? It's a problem I need to solve."

I knew lies and roundabout persuasion wouldn't work on this savage redhead. I could scare her a bit with the Parasite Swarm, but that wouldn't buy me her honest cooperation. To earn that, I simply had to be frank with her.

Besides, I'd only just met her and couldn't bring myself to hate her. Her men might have killed some of my adorable Swarms, but I believed this person was valuable enough for me to justify mending our relationship. Still, there *was* the chance I was making a mistake.

"If I team up with you, I won't have to worry about any more raids, and I get the naval force I require. Naturally, I'm not the only one who stands to gain from this arrangement. You'll get a share of anything I pillage from here on out."

“Hmm... So, you wanna hire us, eh? And y’know what, it’s not that bad a deal, either. But sorry, lady, I can’t make that decision for everyone else. Atlantica’s a pirate colony, but I’m not one of its head honchos. The guys who are? They’re all conniving, cowardly little bastards. Ain’t no way they’d risk joinin’ up with you.”

“That’s a shame. Say, if those leaders were gone, your outfit would cooperate with me, though, right?”

As it turned out, even pirate society had a hierarchy. That meant there was only one solution.

“Well, yeah, I s’pose. Wait, you don’t mean...?”

Isabelle caught on quick.

“Let’s assume—strictly hypothetically, of course—that I were to kill Atlantica’s leaders. And then I *hypothetically* endorsed you to make sure you took their place. Hypothetically.”

We could tear down Atlantica’s old system.

“Not bad... I like it.” Isabelle’s lips curled up in a dastardly smile. “I’ve had it up to here with them, anyway. Even if you hadn’t shown up, this probably would’ve been the right time to stage a coup. And hey, having you guys on our side will be useful. You toppled Maluk and Schtraut, I reckon.”

The mischievousness of her smile struck me as oddly juvenile. I’d thought she was much older than me, but perhaps the actual age gap between us wasn’t that wide.

“All right, so it’s decided,” I said with a smile. “Here’s my plan: you take our ships back with you, saying you captured them on your raid. They’ll be full of Swarms, which we’ll use to launch a surprise attack. Don’t worry, I promise I’ll do everything in my power to avoid harming any pirates. Meanwhile, you work on gathering people for your coup.”

“Yeah, okay. Shouldn’t be a problem. I’m not the only one with a bone to pick with those guys. I’m sure I’ll find plenty of people who’ll wanna pull the rug out from under ’em.”

“Is there anything that might get in our way?”

“Huh. Nothin’ comes to mind. With you on our side, we should be able to chop off the head of the snake. After all, the best way to solve your problems is to duke it out with all you’ve got. That’s the pirate way, savvy?”

Wow. Should I really be counting on this woman?

“Sounds like a plan, then. I’ll be untying your friends, but don’t do anything hasty, okay? I’m only doing this because I trust you.”

“Goes both ways. We’ll be countin’ on you, too, so don’t go stabbin’ us in the back.”

My alliance with the pirates was starting to look like a reality. I also decided I’d join the next operation. I didn’t have sea legs, for sure, but I couldn’t complain.

Atlantica's Rebellion

"The Albatross is back! Looks like Isabelle brought back some extra ships along with the loot!" cried a pirate who was serving as lookout in one of Atlantica's watchtowers.

Isabelle's ship was tailed by the medium-sized merchant ship, where Sérignan and I were hiding, as well as the larger ship, which was full of Ripper Swarms. It was rather similar to the Trojan Horse. For now, the plan was going smoothly, and Isabelle gave no indication that she was looking to betray us.

I had the Ripper Swarms keep a careful watch on the situation. Thankfully, unlike a human army, no member of the Arachnea would ever defy orders and act out of line.

The Albatross skillfully steered between the rocks, leading us right into the pirate's hideout. Not only was Atlantica missing from all the sea charts, but the reef also served to keep the pirates hidden.

I imagined this cave was a natural one that had later been expanded by human hands. It had an opening in the ceiling that allowed sunlight and fresh air to flow inside, and it was structured so that it didn't flood even during high tide.

It was like a pirate base taken straight out of a fairy tale. Just being there filled my heart with excitement and the spirit of adventure. I had to hold back an urge to go "Arrr!"

Atlantica's pirates scrambled up to the wharf, shouting in excitement.

"Isabelle's heeere!"

"What sorta treasures didja bring back today?!"

"Oh, you ain't gonna *believe* the loot we found this time," replied one of the Albatross' pirates with a grin.

"Well, our haul this time is on those other ships," Isabelle said, gesturing

behind her. “Take a good look at ‘em. Big girls, ain’t they? Should sell for a pretty penny, too. If any of you guys want ‘em, I can sell ‘em to you at a discount. We can start negotiatin’ once we unload.”

“With ships this big, we can raid all we want!”

The pirates eyed the ships greedily.

“Yeah, yeah. How much are you gonna take from me this time?”

“Forty percent. Sorry, Blasco’s orders. The leaders say that’s the tax now. Just hand it over, Isabelle.”

“Fine, fine, take your forty percent. I got so much this time, I don’t even care.”

Atlantica’s tax had originally been a tenth of one’s gains, but it had gradually increased since then. This was likely why the pirates were so disgruntled. I could see why they’d be annoyed; someone else kept taking a large chunk of their income. Their superiors kicked back in the safety of Atlantica while the pirates braved danger to bring back treasure, only to have a cut of their earnings taken away.

On the surface, the superiors weren’t simply pocketing the taxes, but rather using it to cover expenses and keep Atlantica running. But, from what Isabelle had told me, these leaders were corrupt and used the money for their own personal gain.

“We’ll be takin’ that share, then.”

The pirates grinned as they climbed the ladder from the wharf to get a peek at the treasure, blissfully unaware that the “treasure” was waiting for them.

“Huh? What, didja steal some cattle or somethin’?” one of the pirates asked when he saw something writhing in the ship’s hold.

A split second later, the man fell to the ground. He thrashed and squirmed on the floor, frothing at the mouth.

“What the...?! What happened to you?!” asked one of his comrades, visibly shocked.

“Look at that!” shouted another, pointing.

The pirates had finally spotted the Ripper Swarms. They crawled out of the hold we were hiding in, their feet clattering against the deck, and lunged at the pirates.

“Eeek! Monsters, monsteers!”

“Oh, God! God of Light, God of the Sea, God of Ships, God of... Pirates, I don’t know! Somebody, save me!”

The mere sight of the Ripper Swarms was enough to demoralize the pirates. Only a brave few dared face the creatures after seeing them up close.

They’re so cute, though...

“The ship’s crawling with monsters!”

“It’s a curse! The treasure is cursed!”

The pirates at the wharf didn’t have any weapons on hand and could only stand there, frozen in terror. This was a relief, actually, since I wanted to avoid any bloodshed if possible.

“Listen up, you lot!” Isabelle shouted from aboard the Albatross. “The leaders are corrupt! Atlantica used to be a place where pirates helped each other, but not anymore! Those bastards have all of us under their thumbs, and it’s been nothin’ but taxation ’n’ exploitation ever since!”

Though they were still wary of the Ripper Swarms, the pirates gradually turned their attention to Isabelle.

“I’m sick ’n’ tired of this Atlantica! That’s why I’m gonna take down the guys who did this and bring our island back to its former glory! Atlantica’ll once again be a place where pirates band together and give each other a helpin’ hand! Where taxes are minimal, and the councilmen are always changin’!”

“Now that sounds more like Atlantica!”

“Hear, hear!”

Cheers broke out in the crowd.

Wow, they really are sick of it all. Isabelle was right; they hate the fact that Atlantica’s leaders take a huge cut of their earnings. I’d probably be pretty

pissed too if my employer started taking away half of my paycheck as an arbitrary tax.

“Anyone who’s willin’ to cut those assholes down to size should come up ‘n’ join these bugs! If you’re not willin’ to fight the good fight, well, you’re gonna become a tasty meal for the bugs instead! C’mon, make your choices, men!”

With the grotesque Ripper Swarms right before their eyes, the pirates faltered. They might have detested the way they’d been treated by the colony’s leaders, but they hesitated to rebel against them.

Wouldn’t accepting Isabelle’s proposal just invite retribution? Assuming they started a revolution, was there even a chance they could win? These sorts of doubts held the pirates back.

“You see these things?! They’re the ones that destroyed the Kingdom of Maluk and the Dukedom of Schtraut! No pirate can beat ‘em! Trust me, we tried... and they kicked our asses!”

“Why did you bring them here?! The bugs are going to take over Atlantica!” cried a pirate down on the wharf.

His question was justified, which was exactly why it was time for me to make an appearance.

“You can rest easy, gentlemen,” I said, stepping out onto the deck. “I am the queen of the Arachnea, the one who leads these monstrous insects. So long as you don’t want to spill our blood, I don’t wish to see any of you come to harm, either. I promise you here and now that I have no desire to conquer Atlantica.”

“Queen of the Arachnea...?” The pirates eyed me suspiciously.

Their misgivings lasted only a moment, however. The surrounding Ripper Swarms lowered their heads and raised their scythes, acknowledging me with their gesture of fealty. Sérignan also stepped out from behind me and knelt down respectfully. Upon seeing this grand display, the pirates’ expressions turned to utter shock.

It seems they’ve realized I really am the Swarm’s leader.

“Those things really listen to her?”

“This is just crazy...”

“I have a proposition for you,” I continued, a fake smile plastered on my face. “I wish for us to become allies. We will support you financially. Now that we’ve conquered both the Kingdom of Maluk and the Dukedom of Schtraut, we have numerous and unimaginable riches, which I’m perfectly willing to share with you. In exchange, we want to buy your cooperation and strength.”

“Allies...?”

“We will offer you support, and in exchange, you will attack the Popedom of Frantz. That’s the motivation behind this alliance.”

I wanted to sic these pirates on the Popedom. They didn’t necessarily have to go to war with Frantz’s navy; all I needed was for them to persistently attack the Popedom’s trade cogs and provoke the navy to counterattack.

This would prevent the worst-case scenario for us, in which Frantz’s navy would attack Schtraut’s vast coastline. My plan essentially consisted of using Atlantica’s pirates in place of a navy and having them draw the enemy away from our shores. If we failed, we’d be faced with the very real possibility that Frantz might stage a landing on our shores.

“What will it be, then? Do you accept?”

“Go on, decide, you blockheads,” Isabelle urged. “You wanna keep slavin’ away under those two greedy mongrels? Or would you rather team up with the strongest force on the continent, take back what’s ours, and get some *real* riches?”

“To hell with the leaders! I’m in on this alliance. I wanna see their heads roll!”

“Yeah! I’ve had enough of them treating us like slaves!”

All the pirates present were on board for the revolution.

“Aye, wise choice, laddies!” Isabelle grinned. “Bring all the captains here, and let’s give ’em the choice, too! Riches or slavery!”

On Isabelle’s order, some pirates and Ripper Swarms scattered, looking to summon the other pirate captains to the wharf. Most of the pirates looked

confused as they stepped up to the ships. They didn't understand what was happening, and they were clearly afraid of the Ripper Swarms.

"What's going on, Isabelle? What are those monsters doing here?!" one of the captains shouted.

"They're my allies," Isabelle snapped. "And dependin' on how everything goes, they could end up bein' your allies, too."

"I'm the queen of the Arachnea," I said to the captains. "I command these monsters, and I want to form an alliance with you."

"Y'see, I'm gonna cooperate with Her Majesty here to purge the leaders and all the corruption that came with 'em."

So far, everyone was acting very rationally.

"You're gonna kill the commanders?" another captain asked, his eyes wide.

"Yeah. I've seen bed bugs less annoyin' than Achille and Blasco. They just kick back and relax here all cushy-like, and then they got the gall to ask for a forty percent tax. And the way this is goin', I can see 'em kickin' it up to fifty or sixty percent."

"You want to keep your profits to yourselves, right?" I added. "Isabelle's trying to make that happen, and we're poised to help her. The monsters here are all prepared to assist in any way they can."

Obviously, I had no way of knowing whether Isabelle would really bring about the utopia they craved. But, if nothing else, I needed the pirates to keep Frantz's navy suppressed for a few years until the war came to an end. As for what came after...

Well, let's just see how things play out. Whatever happens, happens.

"I'll join."

"You're in, Gilbert? Good man," Isabelle said happily.

"Same here."

"Do we really have a choice? If we say no, those bugs'll eat us."

The captains were agreeing one after another.

“All right, all right. I’m in,” the last captain shouted, pounding his fist on a nearby desk.

“All in favor, eh? Heh! Let’s send those suckers to Davy Jones’ Locker.” Isabelle’s smile was deliciously nasty.



“Find Blasco ’n’ Achille, as well as any of the snakes who work for ’em! Once you sniff ’em out, we’ll take care of ’em!”

“Where do they usually hide?” I asked.

“The highest room overlookin’ the area, but neither one of ’em was there,” Isabelle replied bitterly. “I sent your monsters out to find ’em, and they’re looking for ’em now.”

“Hmm. The Ripper Swarms have a strong sense of smell, so they should be able to track your leaders down.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s good. They might have some hidden harbor we don’t know about. We gotta find ’em somehow and make sure they ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

Thankfully, the Swarms were on par with hunting hounds when it came to tracking scents. That aside, I was still baffled that just about all the pirates had sided with the revolution. Everyone, from the lowest of crew members up to the seasoned captains, had joined in—even if the Ripper Swarms’ presence helped coax them into it.

Maybe the idea that the leaders’ fortune and status would be split up among everyone was too lucrative to pass up... Or perhaps the leaders’ corruption had simply aggravated the pirates to a breaking point.

I made a mental note to avoid monopolizing all the fun stuff so the Swarm didn’t end up turning against me. After all, only my little group had gotten to enjoy a dip in the ocean and a barbecue. The other Swarms deserved some time off, too.

“You’ve no need to worry, Your Majesty,” Sérignan assured me. “The Swarm is all in one and one in all. Your joy gives us all joy. The Arachnea will not

squabble over wealth like the humans in this place.”

“You’re right, Sérignan.” I nodded. “We’re a true collective. My joy is everyone’s joy, and everyone’s sorrow is my sorrow.”

The Arachnea was essentially a hivemind, and the collective consciousness connected us all. There was no disparity of wealth, and all emotions—happiness, sorrow, anger, or pleasure—were shared by everyone. That meant there was no room for discrepancies, to say nothing of discrimination. Quite the opposite, in fact. Any individual Swarm would willingly sacrifice itself for the sake of the group.

Our unity was ironclad, and this harmony made the Arachnea somewhat like an ideal society. If I were to send all the pirates here into a Conversion Furnace, they’d never have to squabble again.

“Your Majesty, we’ve discovered one of the leaders. We’ll be leading the pirates there,” reported a Ripper Swarm.

“Good job. Capture him.”

One down.

“Let go of me! Let go! Do you know who you’re dealing with here?! I’m the goddamn leader of Atlantica!”

Soon enough, my Ripper Swarms dragged over a large man bearing an eyepatch.

“Well, well, if it ain’t Achille. What, Blasco isn’t halfway up your ass like usual?” Isabelle asked, taunting him.

“Isabelle! Are you the one behind this?!” Achille bellowed.

“I’m the one askin’ the questions here. You do know your authority ain’t worth jack shit anymore, right? We knocked you off your high horse and down into the mud. Now, be a good boy and answer my question: where’s Blasco?”

“Dammit! I don’t know!” Achille said, thrashing about as he tried to shake off his captors. “I hid as soon as I heard about the rebellion! How should I know where that shitstain ran off to?!”

“Oh, so you don’t know. Well, we’ll find him ourselves. A shame, though. I

thought about sparin' you if you helped us out." Isabelle shrugged.

"W-Wait, Isabelle!" Achille's tone changed. "We can work something out! If you let us leave, you can have all the loot we've got stacked up in the vault! Sounds good, doesn't it? Right?"

"Sure does... Well, it would've before you decided to start takin' half my loot. It's way too late for that now. Sit quiet and accept your fate like a man."

"Damn you all! Did you forget who made you good-for-nothings into pirates worth a damn?! It was us! Me, Blasco, and the rest of the bunch! We gave you ships! We let you use Atlantica as a hideout! It's because of us you could even —"

I silently ordered one of the Ripper Swarms to sting him.

"Stop shoutin', you old geezer. Don't you have a shred of dignity?" Isabelle glared at Achille with a mix of exasperation and disgust as the Ripper Swarms tied him up.

Just as we lined him up with some of his underlings, one of the Albatross' pirates ran over to deliver some alarming news.

"Sis! This is bad!"

"What's wrong?"

"The vault is empty! The treasure's all gone!"

"What?!" Isabelle's expression darkened.

The leaders' treasure—which was an important factor in uniting the pirates—was missing.

"Blasco, that rat bastard! He must've swiped the treasure!" Isabelle hollered.

"Calm down, Isabelle!" I rose to my feet. "Trust me, he's not going to get away with this. My Swarms have already detected someone who fits his description trying to escape Atlantica with a ton of wooden crates. Achille here was just trying to trick you."

"Thanks, I owe ya one. Atlantica needs that stuff! We can't let Blasco have it!"

"Let's go! He's this way!" I hopped onto a Ripper Swarm's back and motioned

for Isabelle and her entourage to follow.

We hurried through tunnels extending across Atlantica. Traveling with pirates through this natural fortress caused me to shiver with excitement.

“He should be around here... There, isn’t that him?”

After traveling through a narrow tunnel that had been difficult to find, we came out into an open grotto on the other side. Before us was a small wharf and a medium-sized galleon moored there. It was a separate, hidden wharf that the other pirates had never known about. And there, at the far end, was the man we were looking for.

Bingo.

“Blasco!” Isabelle drew her cutlass and charged at him.

Oh, dear, she’s got a short temper...

I had to make sure she didn’t get herself killed.

“Sérignan, help her, please.”

“By your will.” Sérignan took off after the pirate.

“You bastard! How dare you try to take off with Atlantica’s treasure?!”

Isabelle roared, waving her cutlass at Blasco. “You’ve done a lot of stupid shit so far, but this really takes the cake! You lying snake!”

“Like yer one to talk, ya traitor!” he screamed back at Isabelle, pointing his own cutlass in her direction. “I only did this because ya kicked up a goddamn rebellion and let them monsters into Atlantica!”

Blasco’s underlings, who had been loading the cargo onto his ship, put down the crates and drew their weapons as well. Frankly, I wasn’t worried at all.

“You will have to contend with me.” In a flash, Sérignan stepped forward and cut down one of Blasco’s men.

Another pirate swung his cutlass at Sérignan, but she quickly flicked away his blade and stabbed the tip of her sword into his throat. When a third pirate charged at her, she ran her sword parallel to his cutlass and drove the blade into his heart.

Sérignan's fighting form was amazing. It was fluid, without error, and betrayed no sign of hesitation. She thoroughly and precisely drove her opponents back. It reflected the experience she had acquired during our battles in Maluk and Schtraut. She was a hero unit capable of constant growth, after all.

"Amazing..."

"That lady's mighty ferocious..."

Isabelle and Blasco were momentarily distracted by Sérignan, despite the fact they were practically engaged in their own battle.

"Weren't you going to finish him off, Isabelle?" I asked.

My question snapped the two of them back to attention.

"Right! Prepare yourself, you rotten fraud!"

"Yer the one who's gonna kick the bucket here, Isabelle!"

The two of them locked blades. Isabelle clearly had the upper hand, probably because her youth afforded her much more stamina. She pushed Blasco back with ridiculous ease and soon had him backed against a wall.

"Dammit! Help me, you idiots!" Blasco yelled.

"I'm not sure who you're speaking to," Sérignan said coldly. "You're the only one left."

She had taken out all of Blasco's men like it was child's play. Having met their demise at the tip of Sérignan's corrupted holy sword, the pirates lay in pools of their own blood.

"Ya useless fools... I spent a small fortune on ya!" Blasco howled as he barely managed to block a swipe from Isabelle's cutlass.

On the next swing, Isabelle's blade dug into Blasco's arm, and his own weapon fell from his hand and clattered to the ground.

"This is as far as you go, Blasco," Isabelle said, pressing the tip of her cutlass against his Adam's apple.

"Grr! Fine, kill me if ya want! Ya can bet yer sweet ass I'll be cursin' ya from

beyond the grave!”

“Ooh, that sounds scary. Guess I can’t kill you, then. I’ll just have somebody else do the honors.” Isabelle nodded in my direction.

Ugh, what is she thinking?

I grumbled internally as I ordered one of my Ripper Swarms to stun and tie up Blasco.

“All right. Now to have them taste the same humiliation we had to go through,” Isabelle said, an evil grin playing on her lips.

The Bloody Bay

In one corner of Atlantica, there was a place known as the Bloody Bay. A bay only in name, it was the inlet where Blasco bred and fed his sharks. It owed its moniker to the fact that the water's surface was practically always crimson with blood. Blasco had fed hostages who never fetched ransoms and traitorous pirates to the sharks. Thanks to that, the sharks infesting these waters had developed an appetite for human flesh.

Even now they circled the inlet, their dorsal fins carving endless loops in the water.

"Hey! Isabelle! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Listen 'ere, Isabelle, we'll make a spot for ya on the council, so please, jus' spare us!"

Achille and Blasco barked and pleaded as we carried them along the wharf overlooking the inlet. Just a little hop and one of these guys would splash down into the shark-filled waters.

"Uh, I ain't lookin' to kill you," Isabelle said, looking puzzled.

I was a bit taken aback. I was sure she'd brought them here to turn them into shark food. But if that wasn't the reason, then why?

Achille looked baffled. "What are you—"

"Lemme put it to you straight: you guys should hand over half of what you've got." Isabelle gave them a nasty smile. "We've gotta run Atlantica, y'know? I'm sure that if you do that, the other pirates will forgive you."

"I'll pay! Half, right? You can have half my fortune!"

"Me too! I'll give ya half!"

Achille and Blasco started singing like an odd little two-man chorus.

"Right, and where *is* that fortune of yours?" Oh, her smile was wicked.

“In the treasure vault...”

“No, no, that’s *Atlantica*’s fortune. Not yours. How much do you two have, personally speakin’? Right here on this island.”

Oh, I see. That’s your angle.

“Uh... Wait! I’ll give you half of everything we earn from now on! So... please!” Achille cried.

“Why wait? We have half of all you’ve got right here.” Isabelle turned to me. “Could you lower ’em in? Just *half* of ’em, though.”

“Two idiots going halfway in, coming right up,” I said.

Isabelle’s plan was actually rather simple. I ordered the Ripper Swarms holding onto Achille and Blasco to lower them into the water. Little by little, of course. We were in no hurry.

“Wait! Isabelle, I was wrong! I’m sorry, so please! Save me!”

“You’re forgettin’ who made ya a halfway decent pirate inna firs’ place! Save us, dammit!”

The two men were shouting at Isabelle for help, but perhaps they should’ve turned their pleas to the Ripper Swarms, given the situation. Soon the pirates were submerged waist-deep in the Bloody Bay.

“Aaah! Aaaahhhh! Help meee!”

“These are your goddamn sharks, Blasco! Do something!”

They squawked at one another even as the sharks began circling them.

“All right, boys, we’ll be claimin’ half of all you’ve got as tax for *Atlantica*. You can keep the other half.”

What happened next, well... that will remain undisclosed. I will say, however, that there was a great deal of blood involved. Isabelle closed her eyes and enjoyed their screams as if they were classical music.

Pirates will be pirates, I suppose.

“Welp, I’d say that’s half of ’em down,” Isabelle said after some time. “Reel ’em up.”

“Ripper Swarms, pull them out of the water.”

The Ripper Swarms did as they were told, and sure enough, everything below the pirates’ torsos was gone.

“We’ll be hangin’ their bodies to rot at Atlantica’s entrance until there’s only bones left. Should serve as a good example as to what happens when you try to pocket other pirates’ riches.”

Decorating your cool secret base with corpses that look like that? What a waste...

“Is your purge over now, Isabelle?”

“Yeah. All that’s left is to seal our alliance.”

Seeing that she was still willing to ally with me was a relief. If she’d chosen to betray me here and now, all of this effort would have been for nothing.



We quickly wrote down the terms of our alliance with the pirates.

Clause number one: “The Arachnea will periodically supply Atlantica with whatever assets it requires—in other words, riches from Maluk and Schtraut. Any resources the Arachnea does not use for buildings and unlocking new structures will go to the pirates.”

Clause number two: “The pirates will proactively attack the Popedom of Frantz. The Swarm will aid them in these attacks and serve as reinforcements. Captains who find the Swarm unpleasant will not be forced to participate.”

Clause number three: “Any loot stolen during these aforementioned raids will go to the pirates. As a general rule, the Swarm will not take any loot from the pirates of Atlantica.”

“You sure you’re all right with this? These terms are tilted in our favor,” Isabelle said, giving me a look. “You’re givin’ us resources and lettin’ us keep all the loot. Don’t you need *any* of it?”

“Hmm. Are you complaining?” Her consideration surprised me a little.

Isabelle was a pirate, so I expected her to take anything she could get her

hands on. I mean, she *did* raid our ports in Schtraut and claim the leaders' treasure... Or rather, the treasure they appropriated and turned into the communal property of Atlantica. Acting as though she wanted us to ask for a little bit more seemed unlike her, to say the least.

"I was just thinkin' that if both of us don't profit from this, the alliance won't last. And we want you to stay on our side... for Atlantica's future."

So she sees this as an investment. I guess that makes sense.

She thought that the alliance would be further solidified if we were able to benefit from it as well. The Arachnea's way of handling external affairs tended to involve force and carnage, so we weren't quite used to the intricacies of diplomacy. Under normal circumstances, the Swarm didn't really divide people into allies and enemies—only prey.

Let's have more civilized negotiations, then. Gotta hold on to that human heart, you know?

"Then I want one-tenth of any loot you get that contains gold. We don't need anything else," I proposed.

Gold was necessary for unlocking structures.

"Well, ain't you generous. Let's make it a fifth. Gold's easy to come by." Isabelle smirked at having upped the ante.

She was a good pirate and a respectable woman. It would have been fun to have her as part of my family.

I wonder what my real family is doing right now...

"Deal," I said, shaking off the thought. "Just you meddling with Frantz's navy is enough, you know. You don't even have to share any loot you get from them at the moment. We just need you to keep them occupied."

"Yeah, we'll handle it. Dealin' with Frantz's navy will be a piece of cake."

I certainly hope so.

"That settles it, I think. Can you sign here?"

I assembled the documents containing the terms of our agreement and

placed them on the table. I couldn't read or write in this common tongue, so I had Roland act as our scribe. Isabelle and I signed as Leader of Atlantica and Queen of the Arachnea, respectively.

"This seals the contract," Isabelle said. "Don't worry, pirates know how to honor a deal."

She left the fact she couldn't have staged the rebellion without us unsaid. Just as we lifted our pens, however, one of Isabelle's men stormed in.

"Sis! There's something going on at the wharf!"

"Goddammit, what now?!" Isabelle huffed and crossed her arms.

"Let's check it out," I told her. "You don't want them to rebel against your leadership so soon, right?"

"Yeah... I've heard of short-lived rulers, but shit! I ain't even been in control of this place for a day!"

With that, the two of us made our way to the wharf.



"I'm telling you, we can't send out any ships right now!"

"You coward! What kinda pirate's afraid of those things?!"

There was a dispute taking place on the wharf. A couple of captains were exchanging harsh words, and they looked just about ready to draw their cutlasses.

"What are you arguing over, you blockheads?!" Isabelle shouted, barreling onto the scene.

"Isabelle, this gutless prick's saying there ain't no way he'll send ships out to sea! Says he's scared of the sea serpents!"

"Yeah, because those aren't *normal* sea serpents! They're massive, and it's like they're out to kill any human they can find! I was attacked by one of those things once, and that's more than enough for the rest of my life! No ship of mine's going out there right now!"

Sea serpents... Must be like the one Sérignan and Roland fought a while back.

“Is there some way to exterminate them?” I asked.

“Huh? Well, usually two or three harpoons do them in,” one of the pirates replied bluntly. “But that big one, it didn’t matter how many we shot into it! It just kept movin’! It’s a bona fide monster!”

“Hmm... That might be the same sea serpent we ran into recently. The Ripper Swarms stunned it with their venom, and Roland and Sérignan dealt some hefty damage to it. It didn’t die, though.”

“You fought that thing? A wounded sea serpent?”

A wounded sea serpent... That sounds about right.

However, deep down, something was bugging me.

Sea serpents might be a native monster to this world, but one of the game’s factions also employed them as units... Just like the wyverns. I hope it’s just a coincidence.

“Seems like it. Is it really that much of a nuisance?” I asked.

“Of course it is! It’s a freakin’ sea serpent! We can’t set sail in the same waters as that thing... It’ll turn our ships into driftwood and us into fish food!”

“You lily-livered wuss! Just avoid the stupid snake!”

Thus began another argument.

Oh my. Pirates are rowdy, but they can be really cautious when it counts. Err, in a way.

“Looks like you can’t hold up your part of the bargain until the sea serpent problem is under control,” I said to Isabelle.

“Yeah, we gotta do something about ’em.” She shrugged and then took a deep breath. “All right, anyone who’s gutsy enough to join, step right up! I’m formin’ a sea serpent exterminatin’ brigade! We ain’t scared of ’em, and we sure as hell ain’t gonna let this one get in the way of our business! We’ll show ’em that Atlantica ain’t gonna bend to no sea monster!”

“I’m in!”

“Me too!”

The pirates volunteered one after another. Savage as they were, these men were brave. Pirates might have raided helpless citizens to make a profit, but that didn't mean they were cowards who would back away from a fight.

In fact, this courage was what I liked most about Isabelle. Despite the fact that pirate society was dominated by men, she'd fought tooth and nail to claw her way up to captain. Even now, she was heading out to battle. Despite not knowing if she could win, she fearlessly stood up to the challenge. I greatly appreciated that about her.

I can't let someone like her die. Only nasty bastards like Leopold or Maluk's knights really deserve that... Though I guess the rest of the world must think I'm just as vile.

"They said harpoons can't fell the serpent, though. How are you going to fight it?"

"Heh, fire even more harpoons into it, duh! What did you expect? It might be a monster, but it's still a livin' creature. Poke enough holes into it, and it'll drop dead."

Ugh, so you're just going for the brute-force approach...

I didn't think that was going to work. All the pirate ships here put together would still struggle to handle a monster of that size. It could dive underwater and attack ships from there, and we didn't have any sonar or depth charges, obviously.

Trying to punch or poke their way through it would only end in failure. It was time to put aside the brawn and start relying on the brains.

"Then the Arachnea will help you too. We'll be in trouble if you can't send out ships, after all. We'll lend you our forces for this one."

"Oh, you wanna fight the sea serpent too, do you? Huh. Lookin' forward to seein' what you can bring to the table."

The Arachnea had no aquatic or naval units; only a limited number of factions had those. That wasn't to say we didn't have any means of *attacking* units in the water, however.

Sea Serpent Subjugation

After deciding to join the extermination party, we returned to Schtraut to gather the units we'd need for the upcoming battle.

"Ready, everyone?" I asked the units through the collective consciousness.

"Yes, we are all gathered, Your Majesty."

"Good job. Get on board."

I loaded my new units onto the one large vessel we had. They would be our key to killing the sea serpent.

"All right. Lysa and Sérignan, you two join me on the medium-sized ship. Roland, you take command of the larger vessel."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

This time we were going all out, and I was part of the strike force. I seriously doubted I was going to be of any use, but I couldn't give the pirates the impression that I was a coward. Frightened as I was, I had survived a handful of battles already (by hiding behind Sérignan's back).

"All right, once we raise anchor, we should sail here and regroup with Isabelle's forces," I declared, pointing to a spot on the pirates' sea charts.

Our rendezvous point was the spot along Doris' coastline where we'd run into the sea serpent before. Once we met up with them, we would prepare to attract the beast. The pirates planned to lure it in by towing cattle behind one of their ships. A simple solution, and I could only hope it would work.

"Let's get going."

Soon, we left the Dukedom behind us. I was worried about our borders; we were still building walls and Eyeball Spires, but enemy forces could break through if they put their minds to it. On top of that, I had brought Sérignan and our precious new units with me to slay the sea serpent, so our defenses were much thinner than I would've liked.

We need to kill that thing, and fast.

“I can see the pirate ships!” Lysa said.

Looking ahead with a pair of binoculars, I also spotted the pirates’ flag. Lysa had seen it with the naked eye, however; her vision was truly impressive. There were nine pirate ships ahead of us. Atlantica had more, but only nine had shown up. The other captains were likely too afraid of the sea serpent and thus had refused to join.

I can’t really blame them. Their lives are on the line.

One ship broke formation and approached us.

“Ahoy there, Queenie! You all set?”

It was Isabelle’s ship, the Albatross.

“Yeah, we’re ready. How about you?”

“We’re good to go whenever. Don’t worry, we’ve got this.” She smirked. “All right, let’s get fishin’! Brace yourselves, okay?”

“Roger that. We’ve got your back.” I nodded.

Apparently, the Albatross itself would be towing the bait. The pirates had chucked two whole dead cows into the water.

This sea serpent’s a real glutton, huh?

“Sérignan, Lysa, get ready in case something happens. And Roland, make sure your ship follows the Albatross so they’re ready to fight.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

Sérignan drew her sword and glared into the water. Lysa held up her longbow and nocked an arrow, which was laced with paralyzing venom. Roland steered his ship, which was loaded with Ripper Swarms and our new units, to follow the Albatross.

Isabelle’s ship cruised slowly through the water, the meat drifting along behind it. The sea remained calm, but there was no telling when the monster might suddenly burst out from underwater. From what Sérignan had told me, the thing was over 50 meters long.

“Your Majesty, I can feel its presence. It’s coming,” Sérignan said.

“Yeah, I know. I feel what you feel.”

She was sensing something rapidly rising through the water, and this feeling had been transmitted to me through the collective consciousness.

“It’s here,” I whispered.

At that very moment, a long pillar of water surged up next to the Albatross. A massive monster that looked much like a sea snake emerged from within, and true to Sérignan’s report, the thing was easily over 50 meters in length. It leapt above the surface of the water and gobbled up the two cattle.

Oh, what a monster indeed. The fact that such a massive beast lurked in these waters stood as testament to the terrors the beautiful ocean could hide in its depths. A certain horror author who’d written multiple works about horrific sea monsters came to mind.

Intimidated as I was, I could feel Sérignan’s courage through the collective consciousness, and it served to soothe my fear.

“It’s here! Fire the harpoons!”

“Lysa, attack!”

Isabelle and I gave our orders at the same time. The pirate ships fired whaling harpoons, which pierced the sea serpent’s flesh, and Lysa shot it with her paralyzing arrow. This arrow had been dipped in concentrated Ripper Swarm venom, and being hit by it was the equivalent of being stung by ten Ripper Swarms.

“Skreeeeaaah!”

The sea serpent screeched in pain and charged at one of the ships. Isabelle’s pirates weren’t going to go down without a fight; they tried to evade the sea serpent’s attack but failed to dodge it in time.

As the beast rammed its body into the ship, the vessel capsized altogether, sending its crew flying toward the sea. The serpent then sank its fangs into the wooden frame, turning the ship into scraps as the pirates drifted down to a watery grave. Naturally, the serpent’s rampage was far from over.

Oh, crap.

It had all happened in the blink of an eye. Could we really handle this thing? Just as that thought crossed my mind, however, the sea serpent lunged toward the Albatross and my medium-sized ship. We were clearly next on its list.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap.

“Uh, Roland, you ready?!” I shouted.

“Not yet! It’s moving too fast! We can’t catch up!”

Oh, goodie.

Our only hope was the new units riding aboard Roland’s ship.

“Lysa, Sérignan, get ready,” I said, steeling my nerves. “We need to intercept that thing.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

We maneuvered our ship between the Albatross and the sea serpent and prepared to attack. It would be hopeless if the serpent attacked us underwater, but if it were to rise above sea level...

“Hey, don’t do anythin’ reckless! Fall back if you have to!” Isabelle shouted at us from the Albatross’ deck.

“You guys can’t escape, though!” I yelled back to her. “I mean, you have it hooked with your bait!”

“Forget us!” she cried, shaking her head violently. “Prepare to get the hell outta here if you have to!”

Such a brave pirate. Even the fear of death didn’t faze her.

“Look! It’s comin’ up outta the water!”

Bingo.

I knew the monster would resurface; it was no fluke. According to Isabelle, sea serpents had excellent long-term memory. Essentially, this one remembered how Sérignan had repelled it using this ship. Perhaps Sérignan’s voice had traveled underwater.

Come on, big boy. Now's your chance to get even.

I watched as the sea serpent rose from the water, revealing its full form. It certainly looked like a snake, but it had four eyes instead of two. All four of them were fixed on our ship. Sérignan met the beast's powerful glare, prompting it to howl in anger. Its cry rippled the water, jolted the ship, and struck fear into the hearts of all who heard it. The creature's deafening voice was a deadly weapon in its own right.

"Sérignan! Can you keep it in check?!" I shouted, hoping I'd be heard over the animalistic scream.

"Worry not, Your Majesty!" Sérignan yelled back.

The sea serpent menacingly bared its fangs, and Sérignan held up her sword as if to rise to the challenge... Then came a terrible clash. The serpent lashed out, trying to bite her. She pushed back against one fang with her blade, desperately trying to deflect the attack. It looked poised to swallow Sérignan whole, but she was just barely able to keep its jaws open.

"Lysa, cover for her!"

"Roger that!"

Lysa nocked three venom-laced arrows and fired them all at once at the sea serpent. Her archery skills were as astounding as ever.

"Skreeeaaah!" The serpent screeched in pain as the arrows sank into flesh.

And as the creature became more sluggish from the venom, Sérignan made her next move.

"Haaaah!"

Her sword slashed through its jaw, and its head slammed against the ship's deck. That was all she could manage, but she'd still dealt massive damage to the creature. It was down, thanks to their combined efforts, but it wasn't yet out.

"Goddamn. It's still alive after takin' this much of a beatin'. What a monster..." Isabelle muttered.

"Don't worry, Isabelle. We'll take this thing down for sure."

“I sure hope so.” She nodded grimly. “I think I’m startin’ to see why my boys were so scared of this thing. It could probably kill us fifty times over.”

“And you’re still fighting it?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“That’s the pirate way.” She grinned.

The sea serpent twitched a few times as it prepared to crane its neck once again.

Hurry up, Roland...

“Your Majesty! We’re ready!”

Ah, there they are.

Our new units would be invaluable for defeating sea monsters. Roland’s ship was chock-full of them. While they lacked the Ripper Swarms’ scythes, they were several times the Ripper Swarms’ size and had long, scorpion-like tails. The tips of their tails were dripping with a black, viscous fluid.

Toxic Swarms. One of the Arachnea’s long-range units.

Once we had gathered enough souls, I had finally been able to unlock them. The Toxic Swarms were capable of something the Ripper Swarms, Digger Swarms, Parasite Swarms, and Masquerade Swarms were not: attacking from a distance.

“Toxic Swarms! Fire!” I shouted.

The Toxic Swarms obediently swung their large tails and fired what looked like arrows from the tips. Those arrows pierced into the downed sea serpent, which screeched in pain and attempted to flee underwater.

“What the hell’re those?” Isabelle asked, mouth agape.

“Those are Toxic Swarms, the Arachnea’s long-range units. Legend has it that the poison in their tails is capable of downing a dragon. Not sure if that’s true, but it’s still a pretty powerful toxin. I doubt anything that takes the brunt of it would get away unscathed.”

The Toxic Swarms were my ace in the hole. Sea serpents lived in the ocean, so getting up close and personal to cut this one down wasn’t exactly feasible. I

couldn't send the Ripper Swarms after it, so instead I had decided to pelt it with long-range attacks the moment it surfaced. Now we'd be able to kill this thing before it could lash out again.

Suddenly, the sea serpent resurfaced, writhing and twisting in agony.

"What, back for more? Toxic Swarms, fire your second volley."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

At my command, the Toxic Swarms fired more projectiles at the suffering beast. Without mercy, without so much as a hint of pity, they fired their venomous barbs into the sea serpent. Blood began to flow from its mouth.

Following that, the sea serpent started melting. The flesh and skin of its abdomen were the first to melt away, exposing its entrails and bones. A few moments later, even those disappeared, leaving nothing behind.

"Incredible..." Isabelle whispered as she watched the sea serpent disintegrate into the now-still water.

I wasn't nearly as shocked. In the game, enemies afflicted with the Toxic Swarms' toxin *always* melted away. Synthetic or highly defensive units could block the projectiles altogether, but anything else became a fleshy soup within seconds. The sea serpent had actually lasted longer than most; generally, the disintegration was immediate.

"Looks like your little sea serpent problem is taken care of, eh?" I said, turning to Isabelle.

"Yeah, now we can sail all over without havin' to worry about this thing!" she said with a toothy grin.

The pirates let out celebratory hoots and hollers.

Phew... That's a relief.

Now all that was left was for the pirates to provoke the Popedom of Frantz and keep its navy occupied... Assuming everything would go smoothly. Still, I decided to remain optimistic. Worrying over things like that would just tire me out, and now was not the time for any errors in judgment.

The Pirates' Banquet

A merchant ship sailed along the shores of the Popedom of Frantz. The vessel, which belonged to Frantz, was on its way back from the Eastern Trade Union. It was full of priest vestments made by members of the union's Crafters' Guild as well as precious jewels and gemstones that would serve as a donation to Frantz's leadership.

"Hey, something's coming," said one of the sailors. The ship was only a short distance away from the dock.

"Well, what is it?" asked a nearby deck officer.

"Err, it's a ship. It's going pretty fast... and it looks like it's heading our way."

That was when he noticed it: a black flag emblazoned with a skull and crossbones was flapping at the top of the ship's mast.

"Oh no... That's a pirate ship! We've got pirates, everyone! They're closing in fast! We need to get out of here... Full speed ahead!"

"No good! They're gaining on us... There's no way we'll make it!"

Chaos broke out on the merchant ship as it opened its sails wide, hoping to catch the wind and escape the pirates' pursuit. The pirate ship was aggressive and finely crafted, however, and it had nearly caught up. At this rate, Frantz's ship would be in trouble.

"They're heeere!"

At last, the pirate ship was upon them.

"Board 'em!"

"Ahoy there, mateys! Our li'l Kingfish here has come to say hello!"

The pirates cheered and then leapt aboard the trade vessel.

"Eek! Don't kill me!" pleaded the ship's captain, quivering in fear.

"Heh, be good, and we'll consider it," replied a pirate, prodding him with his

cutlass. “How about you start by lettin’ us see everythin’ you’ve got?”

“W-We’ve got priest vestments and jewels in the hold. That’s all, I swear!”

“Ugh, priests’ robes? Guess we can use ’em to wipe our asses. But hey, those jewels look mighty tempting.” The Kingfish’s captain greedily eyed the chest full of gemstones. “All right! You an’ your crew, get on those boats. This ship belongs to us now! If you got any complaints, you can take ’em up with my cutlass.”

“Fine, fine!”

Thus, the merchant ship’s crew fearfully boarded the smaller boats. They were left behind in the water as the pirates took off with their vessel and all its contents, and soon they could see the ships no longer. Eventually, their boats drifted to shore, and the crew wasted no time in reporting the incident, informing the authorities that the pirates were on the move.

In truth, the number of ships attacked by pirates was increasing by the day. Pirate raids usually only happened once every week or so, but now they were happening almost daily. As a result, the Eastern Trade Union felt trade with the Popedom of Frantz was much riskier than before. Other countries took notice, and Frantz’s stream of imports had grown scarce.

By now, the commodities lined up in the Popedom’s markets were all low-quality products, to the extent where even high-ranking clergymen were beginning to feel something was wrong. Like the gradual tightening of a noose, the Popedom of Frantz was enduring a crippling economic chokehold. If left unresolved, this situation could result in civil unrest.

“Allow me to deploy our men and strike the pirates down!” exclaimed the admiral of Frantz’s navy. At present, he was involved in a meeting on how they should deal with the pirate menace.

“Has the navy done nothing as of yet?” asked the general of the Popedom’s ground forces.

“For the last few weeks, we’ve been on standby to attack Schtraut and liberate it from the insects.”

Just as Grevillea feared, Frantz’s navy had been set aside to stage a landing on

the former Dukedom's shores. As such, the admiral had been instructed to ready the ships and fill them with soldiers.

"Well, things have changed. The pirates are taking advantage of the war to raid us, and our supply line is in shambles! If we don't do something, this war will end in our complete economic collapse, regardless of the actual outcome!"

Like the admiral of the navy had said, the pirates' influence on their economy couldn't be ignored. With commerce grinding to a halt, the Popedom couldn't exact taxes from its citizens, and without taxes, the military had no funds. As the leader of the alliance, the Popedom needed to exhibit the greatest military strength, so naturally it needed the budget to match.

With that in mind, the shrinking of the economy and the diminishing taxes were serious blows to the Popedom. If they dallied any further, the nation's economy would collapse before the fighting even began. The lifeblood of the country—its funds—would be severed, and the Popedom would simply perish.

"You say that, but sea routes aren't our only option. We can send caravans to handle trade," replied the general. "The navy should attack the Dukedom's territories as planned. There is now a wall built along the border."

"You think *caravans* can transport as many goods as a ship, or travel anywhere near as quickly? Only a bumpkin who's never stepped on a deck in his life would believe such a thing!"

"What did you just say?!"

The situation could only be described as critical.

"Now, now. Settle down," said Cardinal Paris Pamphilj. "Those pirates are no real threat. We'll be drawing up a countermeasure for them soon. Once that's done, we can have our navy stage the landing on the coast of Schtraut."

Seeing that the right-hand man of the pope was taking the reins of the conversation, the admiral and general fell quiet.

"We must remain united," Paris urged them. "That is why our faith exists. Those insects are enemies of the world, and that makes them enemies of our faith. For that reason, His Grace's will is that we commence an inquisition."

“Inquisition?!” Everyone’s faces stiffened.

An inquisition was a large-scale massacre of those who did not accept the God of Light as the one true God. The Church of Holy Light had become the primary religious organization on the continent because the inquisitors of the past had hunted down most of the heretics. They had skinned the nonbelievers alive and burned them at the stake in city squares for all to see.

It was a hellish sight. Inquisitors in white clothing would stride through the streets with torches in hand, and screams of agony rose from the squares every day. People would rat out their neighbors to prove their loyalty to the faith. Parents would betray their children to the inquisitors and vice versa.

During that time, the Popedom of Frantz was a crucible of doubt and paranoia. Its citizens could trust no one, and they lived in constant fear of being burned at the stake. Consequently, the Church of Holy Light was solidified across the continent, and inquisitions were thereafter abolished for being far too dangerous. With that, the terrors of the inquisition were sealed away as a part of the dark, unpleasant history of the Church of Holy Light.

Or so it should have been.

“We will need the army to take part in the inquisition. After all, we must ensure there are no heretics in our ranks, yes?” Paris said.

“There are no heretics in our army, Your Eminence.” The general shook his head, his face pale. “The Popedom’s military is filled to the brim with believers. There can be no mistaking it.”

“I know nothing of the sort. Anyone who would turn their backs on an enemy of the faith and run is a heretic. Anyone who shows mercy to a heretic is, likewise, a heretic. Anyone lacking the drive to fight the heretics is also a heretic. And *all* heretics will be expelled. Wouldn’t you agree?”

If they complied with Paris’ proposal, the resulting inquisitors would be no different from military officers during the Soviet regime.

“True enough, Your Eminence,” the admiral said. “We must remain unified under the banner of faith. This faith is our weapon, and we must remain true to it even as we handle the pirates. They’ve turned their backs on the God of

Light.”

“I’m quite pleased to find you’re one to see reason, Admiral.” Paris regarded him with a satisfied smile. “For now, work on dealing with the pirates. Schtraut’s old shores will come later.”

With this, the Popedom’s policy for the immediate future had been decided. A new set of inquisitors donned their white garb and began patrolling the cities in search of heretics. Within the military, the soldiers’ faith and willingness to fight was constantly under scrutiny.

Any people reported to the inquisitors were promptly executed. As they watched the inquisitors peel the skin off their neighbors and loved ones before putting them to the torch, the populace trembled in fear.

It was the beginning of a dark, dark era.



Yet another merchant vessel sailed along the shores of the Popedom of Frantz. And sure enough, a menacing shadow appeared on the horizon; this time, it was the Albatross.

Isabelle’s ship slowly crept toward the other vessel, the pirates’ flag nowhere in sight. It stealthily approached the ship, masquerading as another trade vessel.

“You ready, boys?!” Isabelle called to her crew, cutlass in hand.

“Aye, ma’am! We’re ready to fight!”

Ripper Swarms were waiting on the ship as well. The Arachnea had lent them forces, and the Ripper Swarms contributed greatly to the pirates’ efforts. Isabelle’s pirates had enacted numerous raids on the Popedom’s ships. They took over vessels full of treasures, and the spoils of their exploits were filling Atlantica’s vault with a delicious glimmer.

“We’ve been ridin’ high. Thanks to us, Atlantica’s gettin’ rich. This, right here? This is the pirate’s life. And I don’t know about you, but I’m lovin’ every second of it. We steal, we profit, and our vaults are full of gold and silver. Bless the pirate life, lads!”

“That’s right, Sis!”

Isabelle and her cronies took everything the trade ships had. Gold bars, silver candlesticks, countless gold and silver coins—every single one of them piled up in Atlantica’s vault. And all the while, the pirates celebrated with loud, boisterous cheers. Every day was a banquet.

A toast to gold. A toast to silver. A toast to the Arachnea. Life was an all-you-can-steal buffet.

Frantz’s fearsome navy hadn’t shown itself despite all their raids, and Isabelle’s pirates were free to pillage and harass the trade ships as they pleased. At this time, Atlantica’s earnings far exceeded what Achille had been able to bring to the table. Everyone could keep nearly all of what they plundered, which did wonders to whet their ambition.

But for better or for worse, Isabelle and her pirates never killed any of the merchant’s ship’s crew, nor did they take any hostages. After all, the merchants and sailors didn’t resist the pirates, and any sign of resistance was silenced as soon as a couple of Ripper Swarms gnashed their fangs.

“I wonder what’s on that one...”

“I hope it’s a whole lot of gold coins, personally.”

The pirates bantered among themselves as their ship quickly caught up to the trade vessel.

“Right, it’s about time. Hoist the flag.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

Once their skull and crossbones flew proudly at the top of the mast, the pirates prepared to board. The Albatross sailed alongside the other ship as the pirates drew their weapons. They were ready to suppress the sailors on board and steal all the cargo. And indeed, it seemed like any other raid.

“Board ’em!” Isabelle shouted as she herself jumped onto the merchant’s ship’s deck.

The rest of the crew followed suit with practiced, almost graceful leaps. Dozens of pirates hopped from one ship to another in the blink of an eye.

However...

“Men, get in formation!!”

What greeted them wasn't the terrified screams of innocent sailors, but the war cries of soldiers.

“What the...? It's the navy!” Isabelle quickly realized all the sailors were armed.

Unfortunately, it was too late. The battle had already begun.

“Waaagh!”

The pirates were cut down by Frantz's naval officers and toppled over, bleeding. Isabelle's men tried to fight back with their cutlasses, but they were nowhere near as organized as the disciplined naval squadron.

“Don't fall back, boys! We've got just as many men as they do! Kill 'em!” Isabelle cried, trying to inspire her men as she desperately fought back.

But the pirates were falling one by one.

“Dammit! Bring out the bugs!”

Heeding her call, the Ripper Swarms fired their threads and swung onto the ship.

“Those are the monsters that destroyed Schtraut!”

“You damn heretics!”

The sailors recoiled at the sight of the Ripper Swarms. While the men had arms, they were lacking in armor. The Ripper Swarms lunged at them, driving the sailors into a frenzy. Some men were hacked to pieces by scythes; others were pierced with giant, sharp fangs.

“It's a good thing we've got the Arachnea to help us! C'mon, lads, let's turn the tables on 'em!” Isabelle cheered.

“Yeah!”

Isabelle's men moved in to join the counterattack, encouraged by the Ripper Swarms' fighting spirit. They engaged the naval officers with their cutlasses, and the tide of battle temporarily turned in Isabelle's favor.

At this rate, they would win the fight. They would survive, and then they'd go back to Atlantica's shores, where their riches were stashed away. It was this hope that drove the pirates to fight back with all their might.

"Keep goin', boys!"

Isabelle herself largely carried the fight. She fought alongside the Ripper Swarms on the front lines. By now, she had no intentions of taking control of this ship; she was merely buying time so they could get back on the Albatross and flee.

All she needed was a bit more time. Just a little more. She only needed to keep the sailors pushed back a bit longer, and the Albatross would be able to turn its rudder and escape. Some might have called her a coward for this, but she wasn't going to let her crew die in a battle they couldn't win. Pirates survived; that was all that mattered to them.

"Mages, kill those bugs!"

"Yes sir!"

There were mages among the marines. They fired off a series of spells, which exploded beside the three Ripper Swarms fighting next to Isabelle. One of the Swarms was blown to bits.

"They're coming! Call the heavy infantry!"

At that moment, heavy infantrymen stepped onto the deck. They'd been hiding in the ship's hold and only now revealed themselves. They wore dense suits of armor that the Ripper Swarms' scythes couldn't penetrate, and in their hands were claymores, halberds, and mallets. Rising onto the deck, they charged at the Ripper Swarms.

"For the God of Light!"

"For the God of Liiiiight!"

In the end, the Ripper Swarms were an expendable, early-game unit. They lost their viability as the enemy upgraded their units. All they could manage in this battle was to cut an arm off a single infantryman.

"Capture the pirates! Don't let them get away!"

Now that all the Ripper Swarms had been killed, Isabelle was left with just a few pirates. The navy's sailors quickly surrounded them.

"Goddammit...!" Isabelle was desperately trying to think of a way out, but nothing came to her.

"You must be the captain," said the naval commander. "Surrender peacefully, and we'll spare your subordinates. What do you say?"

"Are you serious?" Isabelle asked cautiously.

"Of course." He nodded.

"Then... I surrender. Spare my men." Isabelle chuckled away her cutlass.

"Sis, no! If you do that—"

"You guys surrender, too. It's the only way they're gonna let us live."

"Shit..."

At Isabelle's request, the pirates discarded their weapons.

"Good. Capture them."

The sailors surrounded Isabelle and tied her up.

"Oh, and, uh... Do 'help' those pirates over there," he added.

Those words filled Isabelle with dread.

"Aaah!"

"Help usss!"

The surviving Albatross pirates were grabbed by the sailors and thrown overboard. They were dropped into the water one after another. Considering how far out the ship was, they wouldn't be able to swim to shore.

"You lyin' bastard! That wasn't what you promised!"

"That's funny coming from a pirate and a heretic. As if we'd strike any deals with the likes of you. Not a single one of your pirates will be left alive; those are our orders. Take her to the hold and lock her up!"

The sailors ignored Isabelle's screams as they dragged her away and threw her into the ship's hold.

“Shit... Remember this, you bastards!” Isabelle growled, biting her lips hard enough to draw blood. “You won’t get away with this! You’ll pay for this, with bloody interest! I’m gonna make sure you freakin’ dogs *and* your holy masters suffer! I swear it on my name as Isabelle, the one and only lady pirate! I’ll teach you all a goddamn lesson!”

“Keep flapping your tongue, scoundrel, but there’s nothing you can do,” said one of the sailors, sneering at her. “The Popedom of Frantz is sanctified by the God of Light, and thus it will never be destroyed. We are unified by our faith, and no one can defeat us. You’ll see soon enough.”

Word of Isabelle’s capture soon reached Grevillea, the queen of the Arachnea. One of the Ripper Swarms had spent its last moments transmitting this conversation to the collective consciousness. The drowning pirates had fortunately been rescued by their comrades, and they were soon questioned in regards to Isabelle’s whereabouts.

“They’re taking her to Fennelia, no doubt about it,” her subordinates said. “All captured pirates get hauled off to Fennelia.”

“Fennelia, huh?”

“What shall we do, Your Majesty?” asked one of the Swarm.

She thought about it for a moment. Should she save Isabelle, or leave her to her fate?

“We’re going to rescue her. Our alliance with Atlantica only exists because of her. We can’t have her die on us.”

The queen had made her choice. After that, the pirates set out alongside the Swarm in order to rescue Isabelle.

Rescue Mission

Isabelle had been captured.

Learning of that left me angry and impatient. Just when we'd finally formed an alliance with Atlantica, the enemy had taken our partner captive. This was a major problem we'd have to take care of no matter what.

"Listen up, everyone. We must rescue our ally," I told the Swarms standing at attention in front of me. "Isabelle is a distinguished woman who agreed to be our partner, and now she's in the enemy's clutches. I don't know how they usually handle pirates, but she'll definitely be executed. She got in the way of the Popedom's trade, after all."

They quietly listened to my words. My speech traveled through the collective consciousness and reached the minds of all the Swarms spread out across the continent. I couldn't afford to say anything needless or even let a single irrelevant thought cross my mind.

I had to present myself as the Swarm's trusted queen. They served me faithfully, even laying down their lives in my name, so I had to answer their efforts with strong, unyielding leadership.

"We need Atlantica on our side. Thus, we will go forth and save Isabelle. She is not just our ally, but also a friend who chose to throw her lot in with us. For her, we will march into enemy territory. We will invade Fennelia and take Isabelle back!"

As I gave my order, there were no signs of disagreement or discontent in the collective consciousness. Maybe they honestly saw Isabelle as an ally, or perhaps they were merely obeying my will as their queen. Their hearts were cold and indifferent, so I couldn't quite tell, but I was fine so long as they didn't object.

"Now, we must prepare for battle. You will sink your fangs into the enemy, pierce them with your stingers, and tear them to bits with your scythes. You

must save Isabelle at all costs. For the Arachnea!”

“For the Arachnea! All hail the queen!”

“For the Arachnea! All hail the queen!”

The Swarms cheered at my speech.

“What about our formation, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked me afterward.

“I think we’ll take a hundred and five units. Seventy-five Ripper Swarms and thirty Toxic Swarms. The Ripper Swarms will be our vanguard, protecting the Toxic Swarms as they shoot projectiles from a distance.”

The Toxic Swarms’ venom was deadly, but they were virtually helpless when it came to close-range confrontation; they needed a vanguard of melee units to compensate for that weakness. I was close to unlocking the Ripper Swarms’ upgrade but not quite there. The Ripper Swarms would need to pull their weight for the time being.

Additionally, while Toxic Swarms were capable of firing lethal attacks, their production cost was accordingly high. This meant that, unlike before, I couldn’t just crank out large numbers and send them all out at once. Still, I’d taken my time in producing Toxic Swarms, so now I had a decent amount of them.

In terms of the game, having these kinds of units unlocked meant I was somewhere around the midgame. Incidentally, this was the point when rushes stopped being effective solutions. Around midway through, the enemies began to diversify their units, which meant strategy and knowledge of which unit to use against which was necessary to achieve victory.

I might have had success with Ripper Swarm rushes so far, but that wasn’t to say I didn’t know how to play the game in later phases, too. In fact, I’d managed to defeat other skilled players in tournaments right around this point in the game. Through these wins, I’d proven my skill as an Arachnea player was legitimate.

“I believe that is wise,” Sérignan said. “I will join the vanguard. But, truth be told, I wanted to consult you about something, Your Majesty...”

“Speak, my child.” I nodded.

Sérignan fidgeted for a few moments before bashfully speaking up.

“My body is once more filled with this strange sensation and warmth... Am I about to evolve again?”

“You might be. Let’s try and see.”

In my mind, this was the perfect time for her to grow even stronger.

“All right, Sérignan, try to imagine blue armor. A pale blue color, like the pallid cheeks of the diseased. That will be your new form. Try picturing it... I’ll hold the image of you getting stronger in my mind as well. Good luck.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. My new form...”

I created a mental image of her evolved form and sent it to her through the collective consciousness.

It happened in a flash. Sérignan’s crimson armor crumbled away, revealing a beautiful suit of pale blue armor underneath. This color reflected the terror that would tinge the faces of her victims.

“Erm, is this right?” Sérignan asked as her armor was being reformed.

Not only was she now clad in bluish-white plate, but the wings growing from her back had also changed shape. They were no longer small and tucked away, like a beetle’s—she now had large, thin wings like a dragonfly. Her tough, lustrous exoskeleton reflected off the surface of her wings, dyeing them a glorious hue.

“Oh, yes, that’s perfect. You’ve evolved into your third form, the Pale Knight Swarm. Those wings should enable you to fly, though not for long or too high. Use this power to serve the Arachnea well, Sérignan.”

“Yes! I shall do everything in my power to support you and the Arachnea, Your Majesty!”

This was my hero unit, the Pale Knight Swarm Sérignan. In addition to her limited ability to fly, her offensive and defensive stats had risen across the board, and her venom gained a toxicity that was roughly half of the Toxic Swarms’. She was a wonderful, versatile, all-purpose unit.

That’s my knight.

“C’mon, Sérignan, we have to save our damsel in distress. We owe Isabelle quite a bit, and we need to solidify our relationship with Atlantica, too. I’ll be needing your help with that.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I shall fight to save our ally and guarantee our victory.”

Thus, Sérignan had evolved into her third form. This marked the beginning of our operation to rescue Isabelle. We already had Masquerade Swarms disguised as refugees within the Popedom’s territory, but they weren’t able to enter Fennelia, so they couldn’t give us any particularly useful intel.

The only option we had left was to storm in and take Isabelle back by force. If we could manage that, our alliance with Atlantica would surely last. That was what I believed... and I had no way of knowing how naive that line of thinking really was.



We would need to make our way to the port city of Fennelia aboard the large ship. I picked it because the medium-sized ship couldn’t hold all the forces we’d need for this mission. The large ship was our only real choice, but I wished we could’ve brought the medium-sized ship along to make our escape later on. Still, a getaway wouldn’t matter if we couldn’t stage the rescue operation to begin with.

As those thoughts crossed my mind, one of Atlantica’s pirate captains volunteered to lend me a hand. His name was Gilbert, and he proposed to join us in our rescue of Isabelle.

“I owe Isabelle a few debts, and I haven’t repaid them yet,” he said. “She looked out for me when I was still a rookie and even after I became a captain. She’s a good person, and I want to save her. I’ll help you in any way I can.”

He boasted that his ship was the fastest in Atlantica and great for eluding capture, so we gladly accepted his offer. I wanted to make sure the Swarms would escape with us as well, but our first priority was to retrieve Isabelle.

With our preparations complete, we set sail for Fennelia.

Apparently, the pirates feared the city. Frantz’s navy had a base there manned by thousands of troops, which meant the pirates terrorizing the coastal

towns couldn't touch Fennelia. Yet here we were, about to charge straight into the place.

But we were ready for this. A fight could break out at any point in time, and we'd be just fine.

Our ship's sails were spread wide as it slowly approached Fennelia. If we were forced to submit to an inspection, we'd likely lose quite a few Swarms. Thankfully, since no pirate was reckless enough to attack Fennelia, no ship turned up to inspect us, and we soon arrived at the dock.

"Looks like we're here, Sérignan."

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

Sérignan and I stood on the upper deck as we gazed down at Fennelia's dock.

Yeah, I can see why the pirates are afraid of this place.

Dozens of what appeared to be navy vessels were moored at the dock, manned by burly sailors. More ominous still were the hanged pirate corpses dangling from the lighthouse.

If I were a pirate, I'd avoid this place like the plague too.

"There's a port official coming," I whispered to Sérignan as soon as I noticed him. "We don't have any papers, so it's probably gonna get ugly. Be ready."

"Understood."

The port official approached us to inspect our cargo for customs and examine our docking permit. He was accompanied by sailors from the navy. Naturally, we had no such documents to show. We hadn't had the time to make those preparations.

Right now, we were about to go on a literal rampage and muscle our way through.

This is gonna be fun.

"You take the vanguard," I told Sérignan. "I'll have the Swarms disembark."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

I kind of felt bad letting Sérignan venture out on the front lines all the time,

but I needed time to get all the Swarms out of the ship's hold. She had just evolved, however, so she would probably be able to fight off the enemy without issue.

I believe in you, Sérignan!

"You there, on the ship," the official said as he approached Sérignan. "Where is the captain of your vessel?"

"You will find no captain on this ship," she replied ominously as she undid her Mimesis. "The only thing that awaits you on this vessel is death."

As soon as her disguise was gone, she leapt toward the official. Her blade flashed through the air, and a split second later, the official's head went rolling, and one of the sailors found his torso tragically separated from his lower half.

"Enemies have landed! We're under atta—"

The surviving navy sailor tried to scream, but Sérignan's sword reached his neck before he could finish his sentence. As the sailor's headless body spurted blood into the air like some kind of grotesque fountain, Sérignan smirked ferociously.

"Go forth, Swarms!" I shouted into the hold as I swung the doors open. "The time for war is upon us! Plunge forward and rescue our ally!"

The Swarms lunged out of the ship's hold and landed on the dock. Their impressive speed in performing this feat spoke to their legacy as some of the fastest melee units in the game.

"M-Monsters! There are monsters on the dock!"

"Aaaah! What the hell are the sailors doing?!"

Terrified cries erupted from the lips of the merchant ships' captains, and the naval officials present were equally shocked. But the Ripper Swarms paid them no heed, rushing over them like a tidal wave sent from the depths of hell. The humans consumed by that surge of death were ripped apart, their trunks landing with wet thumps on the wood as their limbs went flying.

A force of death had appeared from the sea. Yes, the Ripper Swarms were a veritable tsunami.

They quickly took over the pier and secured our landing point. The Toxic Swarms descended onto the dock with slow, leisurely steps. These units weren't particularly fast, especially when compared to the Ripper Swarms.

They're still much faster than I am, though.

The Ripper Swarms on the front lines formed a wall, and I deployed the Toxic Swarms behind them. With this, our formation was complete.

"Sérignan, I want you to head into the city ahead of us and scope out the situation," I ordered. "In the meantime, we'll march to the city plaza and remain on standby there."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

Sérignan headed out to scout while the rest of us slowly made our way forward. She was a powerful unit, so I couldn't imagine she'd lose to anyone or anything that might be lurking around here. I also trusted her to know when to retreat. In that regard, she was the ideal unit to send out on recon.

We marched through Fennelia's streets, the Swarms' footsteps clacking out a strange and frightening beat. The townsfolk shut themselves away in their houses. Normally, I would've sent the Swarms out to slaughter them all, but we didn't have the time for that right now. Rescuing Isabelle was our top priority.

Where are they keeping her? Some prison? A fortress? Maybe they're trying to make a spectacle out of her execution?

Whatever the answer, we needed to find her fast, so we kept moving.

The Swarm marches. Tremble in fear, humans, for the Swarm marches.

Despite our violent stride through the city, however, the streets were oddly still. Everyone seemed to be terrified of something. What else did they have to fear except us, the enemies of mankind?

"You, of the Arachnea!" An old woman suddenly burst out of one of the houses.

"Halt." I held up a hand to the Swarms behind me. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want you to take revenge in my place. My daughter was executed. They

said she was a heretic... Those bastards! They... They peeled off her skin and then burned her alive. It was awful, so terribly awful!”

You’re one strange old lady to expect empathy from the Arachnea.

Regardless, what she said about her daughter being called a “heretic” caught my attention.

“What do you mean by heretic? Why did they, erm, mutilate your daughter this way?” I asked the old woman.

“Heretics are what the church calls those who don’t believe in the God of Light. Those who turn their back on the faith are treated the same way. My daughter and her beloved consummated their love out of wedlock, so the church judged them heretics and executed them both...”

I already viewed the Church of Light as a bigoted religious institution, but I never imagined it was *this* bad.

“And you kept worshiping that god until now? Didn’t anyone think that maybe you should... uh, stop?”

“The tenets weren’t enforced like this before! It was a religion of love and tolerance. But now all that’s changed. You can’t trust your own neighbors anymore. There’s no telling who might leak your name to the church.”

Hmm. Looks like something happened. Are we related to this somehow?

“Well, I’m sorry, lady, but I can’t promise we’ll exact revenge for you. We’re the Arachnea. The Swarm, a force that consumes everything without discrimination. But...” I paused for a moment to look at her. “I do hate despicable religions like this one, so I’ll probably end up killing the people who harmed your daughter. I won’t be doing it for you, though, and it won’t quite be for revenge, either.”

We are the Swarm. A recurring nightmare that swallows any who dare to dream.

That was just how we worked. We didn’t do things out of the goodness of our hearts. Just as it was categorized in the game, the Arachnea was an evil faction. If we went out of our way to save someone or something, as we had with Lysa

and Baumfetter, we did it only because it suited our needs.

Is that really true, though? a part of me wondered.

While the Swarm might have sought victory, they didn't explicitly seek massacre. They were driven to kill by a biological urge—the need to propagate—not an emotional one. Wouldn't that make them more neutral than evil?

The only one killing out of emotional impulse was me. I'd wanted to destroy the Kingdom of Maluk because they'd killed Linnet. Even if it was necessary to provide an enemy for the Arachnea, I couldn't deny that I'd become sentimental. I let my feelings take over and sought to kill many, many people. And that thought filled me with sympathy for this woman.

"That's fine. If that's what it'll take to make them pay..." Full of bitterness, the old woman trailed off. A few moments later, she retreated back into her house.

"All right, let's keep going. Onward, to the plaza. If we take over the city center, all of Fennelia should be within our reach."

I urged my Swarms to push on, but much to my surprise, Sérignan returned sooner than expected.

"What happened, Sérignan?"

"Isabelle's execution is already taking place in the plaza, Your Majesty. Erm, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they're right in the middle of it."

What...? Already?

"They've already started? Then we must hurry. We might make it in time," I said.

"I... Yes, by your will." Sérignan nodded, her face grim.

I have a terrible feeling about this.

We picked up our pace. Going too fast would create a gap between the vanguard and the rear guard, so we hurried along at the Toxic Swarms' top speed. I only barely managed to keep up with them.

I don't know how they execute prisoners here, but I have to hurry.

Isabelle was a benefactor of ours who'd looked past prejudice and decided to

ally with us. We'd helped her take down Atlantica's corrupt leaders, of course, but she was our dear comrade, a brave warrior who'd fought alongside us to defeat the great sea serpent. I fervently believed we couldn't abandon her.

However...

"Is that... Isabelle?"

The moment I reached the plaza, reality slapped me across the face. Yes, the execution was certainly underway. Isabelle's skin had been flayed from her scalp all the way down to her waist, and she was currently being burned at the stake. The flames licking her flesh had created numerous blisters, which only served to torment her further.

A crowd of jeering civilians surrounded the fire. "Witch!" they cried. "Heretic!" They hooted and hollered, relishing the grotesque spectacle before their eyes with such bliss that they didn't even notice our arrival. Each time Isabelle voiced her agony, the people roared with pleasure.

Up until now, I had seen many things objectively more gruesome and terrible than this. I had even caused atrocities that likely exceeded this one with my own two hands. But even so, I was thunderstruck by the cruel sight before my eyes.

"Bugs! The bugs are here!"

"There's so many of them! What the hell is the navy doing?!"

The men in white robes carrying out the execution had finally noticed us.

"Your Majesty, are you—" Sérignan began, shooting a concerned glance in my direction.

"Sérignan, go save Isabelle. Now. The rest of you, kill everyone in sight." The orders coming from my mouth were curt and ice-cold.

It was time for a massacre. There wasn't a single person in this plaza worthy of leaving alive.

"It's the monsters! Run! They'll kill us!"

"Run, ruuun!"

Heh, you think I'm letting you get away? You're all already dead.

The Ripper Swarms stormed into the crowd, tearing people to shreds, while the Toxic Swarms rained venomous projectiles down upon them and reduced them to lumps of molten flesh.

"Guards! Call the guards!"

"God! Oh, God of Light, help us!"

The men in white cried out in desperation.

So these are the executioners, I thought darkly.

"Toxic Swarms. Shoot them."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

On my order, the Toxic Swarms aimed their tails at the men and fired. The stingers hit them all square in the chest.

"Gaaah... Aaah...!"

"It hurts... Aaaah! H-Help! Help meee!"

Tormented by the agonizing pain, the men quickly melted into wet masses on the ground.

"Your Majesty, I've rescued her, but..."

As I watched my Swarms butcher the crowd, Sérignan returned with Isabelle in her arms. The pirate's skin had been peeled away, and she was covered in burns and blisters. I could hardly bear to look at her.

"Isabelle... Forgive me," I said, looking her straight in the eye. "We were too late. We wanted to save you, I swear we did."

"Did you... now..." she replied, her voice a hoarse whisper. "Happy to... hear that..."

Despite her condition, her eyes were still burning with life.

"I didn't tell 'em... where Atlantica is. No matter what they did to me... So tell my boys to... do good in the future... You... need their help, right...?"

"Yes, I do. I need your help. We can't win without the pirates."

Having said that, Isabelle had only endured this horrible fate *because* I'd asked for their help. I'd tried to use the pirates, and this was the end result. I never imagined things would turn out like this, but I had once again caused my allies terrible pain.

"You're as... honest as ever, Queenie..." Isabelle gasped. "It's almost refreshin'... Seein' you like this makes me wanna... swindle ya... At least try to... fake it a little, will ya?"

"I'm only being honest because I'm speaking to you, Isabelle. No one else gets this courtesy from me," I replied, grabbing hold of her hand as life began to leave her.

I could speak frankly solely because of the woman who was listening. I might not have been connected to her through the collective consciousness, but I could be just as honest with her as I was with Sérignan and the others. She was one of the few people to ever extend a hand to our army of distorted monsters... One of the few people in this world to accept us.

"What do you want me to do? Tell me, and I'll make it happen."

"Then... let me go in peace," Isabelle croaked. "Put me down with one clean hit... This is a little too much... even for me, see? So please... Put me out of my misery..."

"All right. If that's what you want." I nodded and called a Ripper Swarm over. "Put her to rest. With one blow."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

It might've been my imagination, but its voice seemed oddly somber.

A moment later, the Ripper Swarm put an end to Isabelle's suffering.

"I'm so sorry, Isabelle."

Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched the lady pirate Isabelle depart. I could count the number of times I'd cried in this world on one hand, but...

Never forget your human heart.

Those words resurfaced in my mind; perhaps this was what opened the floodgates. Someone—I couldn't remember who through the fog clouding over

my memory—*someone* had told me those words. They were kind, but their tone was strict and admonishing. As if to remind me that I was still human, that I still had my own heart. As if to warn me that I must not be overtaken by the Swarm.

But if it meant my heart would ache this much, maybe I was better off submitting to the Arachnea's will. My pain was so deep and vast that I was seriously considering allowing the maelstrom of the Swarm's desires to devour me.

It hurt. It hurt so very, very badly. I was sad, angry, and hollow... The fact that I had a human heart only meant that it would be wracked with pain like this over and over again. Since coming to this world, I'd been responsible for tens if not hundreds of thousands of deaths. I either cared about these deaths, or I didn't.

Some deaths were special to me, like the deaths of people I knew or was involved with, or deaths that were a setback to our goals. Whenever that happened, I was filled with sorrow and rage.

As for the deaths I was indifferent toward... It was like hearing about the statistics of an event happening in some distant country. Those did nothing to weigh upon my fickle heart. I could order tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people to die and not be moved by it. The same was true of the massacre in this plaza.

I had already experienced many deaths of people who were special to me: Linnet, the people of Marine, Isabelle... And whenever that happened, I became emotional. So emotional that no amount of killing could take my mind off it.

"Sérignan. Kill everyone in this city. Burn it to the ground. I need to see everyone here dead."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

The Ripper and Toxic Swarms broke up into groups and began their rampage through Fennelia.

"Oh, but leave just one of them alive—that old woman who asked us to avenge her daughter's death."

My emotions were running high, but I could relate to how she felt. Watching someone you cared about flayed alive and burned at the stake was a horrible experience.

“This town is going to be real quiet, real soon,” I murmured while the people screamed.

Sure enough, the shrieks and death rattles faded out before long, and Fennelia became absolutely silent. The streets were filled with the mutilated bodies and puddles of flesh which had once been Fennelia’s citizens.

It was quiet, so very quiet. All I could hear was the distant crashing of the waves.

“You hear that, Isabelle? That’s your requiem. Fitting for a pirate, wouldn’t you say?” I looked down at Isabelle’s head, which was resting on my knees.

The emptiness felt awfully lonely, but at the same time, it was somehow peaceful. And Isabelle needed that.

No... Isabelle didn’t need anything anymore.

I needed this.

Right now, I needed to mourn her, and I needed silence. Silence filled only by the sound of the waves. If I didn’t have that, my heart would certainly explode, and I would lash out at anything and everything around me.

“Oh, Gilbert’s ship is here. Let’s go,” I said, signaling Sérignan and the rest of the Swarm through the collective consciousness.

My army returned to the lonely dock after killing all the people in the city, save for one old woman. Sérignan’s blade was dripping with blood, but upon seeing it, I felt nothing.

“What do we do now, Sérignan?” I asked morosely.

“Whatever you wish, Your Majesty.”

Hmm. Whatever I wish, huh?

“I want to destroy the Popedom of Frantz. And I don’t intend to let them die easily. They’ll pay. They’ll pay with their flesh and blood for what they did to

Isabelle.”

It wasn't long after that Gilbert came to pick us up.

“Where's Isabelle?” he asked.

I shook my head and pointed to a couple of Ripper Swarms. They were carrying Isabelle's body onto the ship, covered in a white sheet.

“She didn't make it, huh?” Gilbert sighed as the ship departed. “Guess it's true what they say about good people being the first to go. Just when we thought things were looking up for us, she had to get herself killed... And we needed her, too.”

When his lips next parted, he began what I assumed to be a pirate's memorial service.

“All the gods who watch over us, greet the soul of this brave pirate with open arms. I pray that you welcome her to heaven. May she receive the ocean's mercy.”

It was a burial at sea. A great pirate had no need for a tombstone or epitaph. With Isabelle laid to rest, we began plotting retribution.

The Seeping Poison

Ever since the Dukedom fell, Schtraut's surviving citizens had flocked to Frantz as refugees. Driven into the Popedom when the Swarm began building walls along the border, they were welcomed by the order of Pope Benedictus III.

But what awaited them was not a sanctuary—it was a living hell. Inquisitors constantly patrolled the streets, and anyone who went against the Church of Holy Light's tenets ever so slightly was promptly executed. The refugees had stumbled into a hunting ground for heretics.

Prostitutes were the first to be burned at the stake; then came the beggars, then the merchants, and soon enough the executions became indiscriminate. The Dukedom's refugees tried to flee to the Eastern Trade Union, but the inquisitors were also watching over checkpoints at the border, keeping a close eye on anyone trying to enter or exit the country. No one could escape the Popedom unless they showed devout faith in the God of Light.

There was only one house of sinners untouched by the inquisition: a four-story building on the outskirts of Saania.

"We've been waiting for you, good Father," murmured a young woman wearing a revealing dress.

"Lovely, thank you. The usual, if you would. Same wine as last time, too."

"As you wish."

This was a brothel. Prostitutes had been the first to burn for being an affront to God, but the prostitutes who served the clergy were given preferential treatment and spared from the inquisition. On paper, they were considered nuns of the Church of Holy Light.

It was dreadfully hypocritical, to be sure, yet this sort of skulduggery often made the world go 'round.

To begin with, the clergy was akin to nobility in the Popedom. The lower-ranking clergymen were another story, but the high-ranking ones were equal in

status to the council members of the Eastern Trade Union or the high nobility in the Nyrnal Empire.

People of their status wouldn't dare relinquish pleasure from their lives. The same lips that loudly advocated the God of Light's teachings in the morning spent evenings indulging in the sweet tastes of women and wine.

"Everything's ready for you, Father Jacquetta. Right this way."

The priest rose from his seat, eyes sparkling with excitement, and followed the woman to one of the rooms.

"Now, make yourself at home." As they reached the door, she regarded him with an alluring smile, then turned and walked away.

"Daisy, I have a gift for you today," the priest said, stepping inside.

"My, a present? How wonderful!" The woman waiting within clapped her hands in delight.

The silvery moonlight outlined her exposed thighs, and her skin was visible through the translucent fabric of her camisole. Mesmerized by the sensual sight, the priest swallowed hard.

"Yes, I brought you this. Trade's been stagnating because of the pirates, so I ordered it to be brought by caravan—a black pearl necklace from the Nabreej archipelago. It's all yours."

"Oh, Jean, it's lovely! Black pearls from Nabreej are rare, aren't they?! Thank you!"

The Nabreej archipelago was a chain of islands off the coast of the Eastern Trade Union. It had once been part of the union, but it had since declared independence and now functioned as its own mercantile country.

This area was famous for its black pearls, which were often bought by noble ladies and worn for social occasions. Knowing this, Nabreej intentionally controlled the number of pearls being sold, ensuring their merchants could sell them at a high price.

Father Jacquetta could not have cared less about the God of Light's moral doctrines of honorable poverty. He was paid large amounts of money and made

a show of his wealth by purchasing these black pearls.

“Well, actually, I have a present for you, too,” Daisy purred. “Could you close your eyes for me, darling?”

“Of course, my dear flower.” The priest closed his eyes, his lecherous imagination running wild.

“Open your mouth.”

Expecting a kiss, the priest did as he was told and parted his lips. And then, in the next moment...

He felt something crawl inside his mouth.

“Aaah!” His eyes widened as he tried to cough up the thing slithering into his throat.

It was a Parasite Swarm. The bug quickly clung to his throat and extended its tentacles, assuming control over the priest’s body. The priest’s face slackened, losing all expression, as he turned around and left the room with wobbly steps.

“Leaving already, Father?” asked the woman in the lobby.

“Yes. Going home... for the day...” he replied and promptly left the building.

“Good work.” A girl’s voice and the sound of dry clapping filled the lobby as soon as the priest was gone. “That makes ten of them... and half of them are part of the Popedom’s political core. Excellent work. Hats off to you, Madam Amelia.”

“I’ve held up my end of the bargain, so where’s my reward?” replied Amelia, the woman presently in charge of the establishment.

“It’s right here, of course. I believe you’ll find your share... generous.” Their visitor, the queen of the Arachnea, snapped her fingers.

A man appeared at once, carrying a large wooden chest. He placed it on the floor with a thud, then used a crowbar to pry it open, revealing a heap of shining jewels. Rubies, sapphires, diamonds... Lady Amelia’s breath was caught in her throat at the sight of all these precious stones.

“Can I... really have all this?” she asked, almost fearful.

“Yep. In exchange, I expect you to work with me going forward. If you refuse, though, I’ll have to kill you.”

Suddenly, the man’s face split in two, revealing a giant insectile head lined with sharp fangs. Amelia screeched at the sight and staggered back a few steps. She had already seen the former owner of the brothel eaten alive by a Masquerade Swarm.

Today’s events could be traced back to roughly two months ago. On that day, a girl calling herself the queen of the Arachnea visited the brothel, accompanied by a Masquerade Swarm in the form of a manservant. Had the former owner of the brothel simply cooperated, he would have ended up with a great fortune on his hands.

But he had refused, claiming they had their own ways of earning money—namely, secretly selling women to the clergy. As such, he saw no reason to take a risk with some unknown faction... and thus he was promptly devoured alive by the Masquerade Swarm. Its face had given way to a pair of fangs that crunched down upon the owner’s head, after which the man was reduced to nothing but a lump of flesh.

Amelia had seen it all. The owner had often ordered her to engage with the customers, so she was unfortunately present for his gruesome demise.

“You didn’t get along with him, did you?” the queen had asked afterward, her tone complacent.

“N-No!” Amelia had replied hastily. “He treated us terribly, and he’d sell us to any disgusting pervert that would pay. Everyone hated him.”

“Then I suppose I’ll turn to you instead. I want you to take over for him and run this place, then strike a deal with us. Is that clear? I promise you’ll be well-compensated for it.”

Intimidated by the Masquerade Swarm’s deadly maw, Amelia had no option but to agree. In doing so, she secretly became a conspirator in the Arachnea’s shady plots. She stepped up as the new proprietor of the brothel while the Arachnea’s queen did her own work in the shadows.

Every now and then, the queen would give one of the prostitutes some nasty

bug and demand that they force it into the mouths of high-ranking clergymen, just as Daisy had done today.

Amelia didn't know if she actually stood to profit from this arrangement. True, she'd received an extravagant payment just now, but if the inquisitors were to peel back the curtain even a little, she would be in deep trouble. If she were to fail, she would either be killed by a Masquerade Swarm keeping watch over the brothel or burned to death by the inquisition.

"You don't need to worry about the inquisitors," the queen said, as if reading Amelia's thoughts. "The head of the inquisition has already visited this place, and he's under our control. They won't come here, at least, so long as you stick to using that mountain of jewels for all the right reasons. Not that there are too many ways of spending riches in this country nowadays. All the high-class shops were burned for opposing the virtue of honorable poverty, and if you spend too much money in a normal store, you'll be executed. This country's pretty much rationing by force."

The queen had hit the nail on the head. All the fancy clothing stores, jewelers, and restaurants had been marked as opposing the faith and burned to the ground with their owners locked up inside. The amount of goods sold in other stores was strictly regulated, making it so commoners could only buy so much. The Popedom was limiting the distribution of its precious goods in preparation for the war with the Arachnea.

"I just hope these dark times end soon..." Amelia muttered tiredly. She bemoaned the fact that the people of Frantz had been divided into victims and informants, all in fear of the state.

"Oh, they will. It will all be over soon." The queen's words were curt and foreboding all at once.

Everything will come to an end... Very, very soon.

Amelia didn't realize that there was a great deal of truth to the mysterious woman's words.



"We now know who started the inquisition," I proclaimed before the Swarm,

which stood gathered in the large base we'd built between Schtraut and Frantz. "His name is Paris. Paris Pamphilj. He's the one who reinstated the inquisition years after the concept was abolished, reigniting the hunt for heretics. Right now, the inquisition has its fingers in pretty much every aspect of the state. The inquisitors are effectively his secret police."

I uttered Paris' name with disgust. Because of this man's decisions, Isabelle had endured a torturous, agonizing death. The mere thought of it sent my hatred skyrocketing to a level that went beyond regular bloodlust.

"In addition, we've confirmed that an organization called the Mystical Research Division is on the move. They're an intelligence force looking into us and the Empire of Nyrnal. We're not certain how much they know about us, but we can't be careless."

I'd gained this information from an employee at the brothel. One of the prostitutes had used her womanly wiles to get one of her clients to talk before she infected him with a Parasite Swarm. The information he had was then relayed to me.

The Mystical Research Division dealt with international investigations and counterintelligence, but it hadn't been as active since the inquisition absorbed many of its responsibilities. It followed through on its remaining duties—which included digging up dirt on the Nyrnals and ourselves—with ardor. We had walled off our borders, but there was always the possibility those walls could be scaled.

"As such, once preparations for plan A are complete, we will begin military operations in Frantz. You see, plan A involves wiping the Popedom off the map. We will split into three armies and carry out the operation from both the east and the west. We are to thoroughly and utterly erase all traces of Frantz's existence."

Just as we had eliminated the Kingdom of Maluk, no traces of the Popedom of Frantz would remain.

"Annihilate the Popedom of Frantz. That is an order." Even to me, my voice sounded cold and firm.

"A wise decision, Your Majesty," Sérignan said.

“They have to pay for what they did to the pirates,” Lysa added with a curt nod.

“But Frantz is much larger than Maluk and stronger than Schtraut,” Roland noted. “Will we truly be all right?”

I understood Roland’s doubts. Like he said, the Poppedom of Frantz had more territory than the Kingdom of Maluk, and unlike the Dukedom of Schtraut, it was ready for this war and had developed countermeasures against the Swarm.

“We intend to disrupt them during the next operation. I want the Poppedom to suffer for what it has done. Paris Pamphilj most of all, for leading the inquisition.”

I would make Paris pay. Isabelle wouldn’t have had to suffer so much if it weren’t for him and his damnable inquisition. If anyone deserved to experience her pain and humiliation, it was definitely him.

“Your Majesty, aren’t your emotions running rather high?” Roland asked, his voice tinged with concern.

“Nope. I’m the same as ever,” I replied stubbornly. “The Swarm’s collective consciousness drew me in, and I lost my human heart long ago. I don’t even count as human anymore, so I can’t possibly be emotional. Do the Swarms have emotions? They don’t, right? Then I’m just the same, since I’m part of the Swarm and all. My emotions aren’t running anywhere; they’re dead and buried by now. That’s the truth of it, Roland.”

That’s right, I’m part of the Swarm. I can’t have emotions anymore. But, hmm... Haven’t the Swarms shown more feelings recently? Sérignan cries a great deal, and the other Swarms rejoice when they win. Aren’t those responses to their emotions?

But no... I don’t have emotions. The Swarm doesn’t deal in retribution or vengeance. They don’t feel anger or sadness when faced with the death of someone who was special to them.

For the Swarm, all was one and one was all. They only thought of the good of the collective, with no room for individuality. However, I had shown them what *appeared* to be emotional displays. The fact that I could shed tears when

Isabelle died meant my emotions hadn't been completely drowned out by the collective consciousness.

Maybe I was still human, after all. Maybe I still had my human heart. At this moment, though, I couldn't truly tell.

"For now, we'll need to disrupt the enemy army," I told Sérignan. "Then we can start cooking them, little by little. An army without a chain of command is as brittle as a sand castle."

After that, I retired to my room. I crawled into bed, brooding.

Why am I fighting in this world? Why do I keep losing the people I care about? Why am I...



Before I knew it, I was back in my apartment.

"Sandalphon?" I called out.

Whenever I came here, that girl was there to greet me. This time, however...

"My condolences, but Sandalphon isn't present," said a girl wearing all black.

If memory served, her name was Samael. She twirled toward me with light, prancing steps and a nasty smile on her lips. A part of me felt frightened of Samael; something about her gave me a bad feeling.

"You're on the verge of destroying yet another country. That makes three already, right? Quite a lot of blood on your hands," Samael said, still smiling. "You're a mass murderer by now. I don't think there's a person alive who's killed as many human beings as you have."

"Yes, I've certainly killed a lot of people," I said. "But I regret nothing. Any murder I committed was necessary and justified. I only set out to kill when someone on my side was hurt. I don't regret it one bit."

"Then what do you call this dark emotion brewing inside you?" Samael asked, tracing my chest with a finger. "There's something pitch-black writhing around in here, _____. The truth is, you've stained your hands with needless murder, haven't you? Isn't your body just burning with a malicious desire for revenge? Aren't you killing people because you want to see them die?"

I couldn't deny Samael's words. I was trying to exact revenge for Isabelle. Upon her death, I resolved to completely obliterate the Popedom of Frantz. I was about to commit a massacre for my own personal satisfaction. The flames of my desire for vengeance had spread through the collective consciousness, growing into an inferno, and I was about to act on it.

What I was about to do wasn't really going to benefit us as a collective. It was a cruel act that would be done in the name of my—and, by extension, the collective consciousness'—craving for slaughter.

"Go ahead and keep killing," Samael told me. "Drench your hands in blood. Let the Swarm's will take over and keep killing, reproducing, and killing even more. Destroy everyone and everything. Leave no one on that continent alive. Level the Popedom of Frantz, the Eastern Trade Union, the Empire of Nyrnal... Ruin all these nations and their citizens. Trample countries, cities, and people. Overrun it all, and obtain your bloodstained victory. The Swarm longs for it, too. They seek absolute victory, where everyone lies crushed beneath your feet. Only you can guide them."

Maybe submerging myself in the collective consciousness and blindly eradicating everything in our path was the right idea, after all. It would be easier that way. I wouldn't have to feel anything anymore. No sadness, no anger, nothing.

"Now go forth, and begin your march of massacre," Samael said in a sing-songy tone. "Kill, and kill, and kill some more. Paint your path with blood and gore! Indulge in slaughter forevermore.

"Slaughter is your mission, your role, and your duty. As the Arachnea's queen, you will send droves of people to their deaths simply for the sake of your precious insects. So kill, and kill, and kill some more.

"Slaughter is the Swarm's joy. And I'm sure you can't deny that, for no one knows the Swarm better than you do. It's the same as the game. Everything is! You know, the game you love so much? Go on, surrender yourself to the collective."

She's right. I just need to kill and keep killing. All I have to do is give up my heart and soul to the collective consciousness and take up the axe of the

executioner.

But at that very moment, a jolt ran through my body.

“Silence, Samael,” said a dignified voice.

“Sandalphon, is that you?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s me, _____,” she answered, her white clothes practically a light in the darkness. “My heart aches for you; you are so deeply wounded. No one can understand your sorrow, and you must carry that pain all on your own. You are forced to play the part of the queen, and thus you cannot share your sadness with anyone else. Even if the Swarm were to feel your sorrow, they would not know how to comfort you. Solitude can be so very cold. Cold enough to turn one’s heart dreary and desolate.”

Sandalphon reached out and gently held my hands.

“But Sandalphon, I’m connected to the Swarm’s collective consciousness. I’m not human anymore. And... I’ve killed too many people. Letting the collective overtake me would be easier. I can’t stand to lose anyone else anymore.”

The memory of Isabelle’s death surfaced in my mind, and tears began to drip down my cheeks. She had been such a brave, strong-willed pirate. We had only just tied our bonds of friendship, and I couldn’t bear losing her. I had lost many people dear to me already, and I could clearly tell my heart couldn’t take any more.

“You don’t need to let the Swarm’s will consume you. You’re lashing out because someone close to you was murdered. It’s only natural to harbor such emotions; no one can blame you for that. It’s a perfectly human reaction, and it’s proof that your humanity is still intact.”

“But I...”

I was about to massacre countless people wholly unrelated to her murder.

“Your anger runs deep. Finding fault with everyone around you is a natural response to sorrow. I will also say that these people cannot be called unrelated. The soldiers and inquisitors you aim to kill carry the sin of supporting this regime. One cannot call them unblemished souls. You are merely taking out

your revenge on them.”

“But is that really all right, Sandalphon...?”

I was truly worried that my mind had already merged with the collective consciousness. If so, perhaps it would have been better to surrender myself to the Swarm’s will.

“It is. Anger is a human emotion. Humans may be incomplete, but they are warmed with affection for others just as they are shaken by the currents of sorrow and joy. No man alive has complete control of his emotions. If you wanted to kill people without reason, I would have tried to stop you. But right now, your motives are clear, and that’s why I won’t deter you. Still, you mustn’t forget, _____.”

Sandalphon gazed directly into my eyes.

“You must never forget your human heart. Don’t indulge in meaningless slaughter. You have not yet been overtaken by the collective, so I want you to continue protecting your heart. It is absolutely necessary.”

“Oho? Are you sure about that, Sandalphon?” Samael asked playfully. “Wasn’t this girl meant for judgment the moment she took a life for the first time? I’m right, aren’t I? Or maybe the moment she _____, her fate was already sealed?”

“Silence, Samael.” Sandalphon shot her an icy glare. “She still possesses a human heart. That’s exactly why the malicious situation you’ve created gives her so much agony.

“For now, return to where you belong, _____. I will save your soul soon enough. So long as you don’t forget your human heart.”

“Wait, Sandalphon. Is this really—”

Before I could finish, a sensation of freefall overwhelmed me. And as I fell, Sandalphon watched over me with a kind smile.

Just Deserts

The Popedom of Frantz relentlessly continued its persecution of the heretics. One after another, its citizens were caught by the inquisitors and put to death.

“This is horrifying. They’re still hunting down heretics...”

“Such a tragedy. I feel like their definition of who is and who isn’t a heretic is becoming less clear as time goes on.”

A young couple in the capital of Saania was discussing the state of affairs. Their names were Gina and Frederico. This happy couple was well-known in their neighborhood for running a local bakery. Their bakery was once famous for its sugar buns, but they were currently forbidden from selling them, as they were considered a luxury.

“I heard Mr. Biliotti from the Merchants’ Guild was burned at the stake recently. For all we know, someone could tattle on us next.”

“D-Don’t say things like that, Frederico! We’ve been abiding by each and every tenet to the letter!”

Anxiety and distrust were spreading among the populace. There was no way of knowing when another citizen might report you or crack under the duress of torture and pin their sins on another. Like Soviet Russia during its great purge, the people could not trust their neighbors and were fraught with doubt. This couple could trust each other, but not anyone else.

“Umm, excuse me...”

It was then that a girl stepped into their store.

“Yes?”

“Well, I’m a refugee from the Dukedom of Schtraut, and I’m looking for a place to work,” the girl squeaked.

Frederico sighed. “I see. I’m very sorry to hear that, but we’re not in any condition to—”

“Come now, darling, let’s hire her. The inquisitors might choose to overlook us if we do a little good.”

“All right, then, let’s put you to work,” Frederico said with a sigh. “Do you have any experience working in a bakery?”

“No, but I did work as a waitress back in Schtraut. I’m sure I can help you when it comes to serving customers!” the girl replied enthusiastically.

“All right, that should be good enough. What’s your name, miss?”

“It’s Maëlys. Maëlys Maurice. A pleasure to make your acquaintance!” She graced them with a quick, polite curtsy.

“All right, Maëlys, I hope you enjoy your time working here.”

“Thank you!”

This sort of pleasant exchange between a refugee from Schtraut and citizens of the Popedom was quite rare. Most people avoided them, fearing that contact with refugees would only land them in trouble with the inquisition. The refugees likewise worried that needlessly getting involved with the civilians would draw the attention of the inquisitors.

“I’m really looking forward to working with you!” Maëlys exclaimed.

Thus, Maëlys became a new employee in this little Saania bakery. The sight of this cheerful, hardworking girl attracted numerous customers, and Frederico’s bakery saw loads of foot traffic despite only being allowed to serve plain bread.

But later down the line, this course of events would only lead to tragedy.



The Cardinals’ Council was a regular assembly of all the cardinals in the Popedom of Frantz. Typically, the pope would also be present for the council, but Benedictus III was exhausted from his duties and therefore hadn’t been able to attend as of late.

“In light of the attack on Fennelia,” said Paris, “I’m afraid sending our navy into Schtraut is now effectively impossible. If we can’t mobilize our forces to handle the pirates, we won’t be able to secure the sea routes. And as you all know, the costs of bare necessities in this country are already on the rise.”

The naval base in Fennelia had been attacked by the Arachnea's queen, who had reduced the port city to an unoccupied heap of buildings and bodies. This dealt a considerable blow to Frantz's navy, which meant invading Schtraut's territories by sea was no longer a viable option. Many of the navy's sailors and officers had perished, leaving empty, unmanned ships in their wake. It didn't matter how many ships they had if they lacked the manpower to operate them.

"No, I believe we should still go ahead and attack Schtraut with the forces we have left," said one of the cardinals.

"But our navy is crippled." Paris gaped at the other cardinal in disbelief. "Trying to send out the meager forces that remain would be suicide. I'm against the idea."

"Then are we supposed to sit back and wait for the enemy to come to us? Cardinal Pamphilj, I'm afraid you're not being assertive enough. Or perhaps we ought to interpret this as a lack of faith?"

"That's right. You're under suspicion of heresy, Cardinal Pamphilj."

Paris was shocked. It had been his idea to persecute the nation's heretics, so he'd never expected that the blades of the inquisition would be turned toward him. He'd assumed that all the cardinals, himself included, were exempt from the threat of the inquisition. After all, his heart was filled to the brim with faith.

He'd only suggested hunting down the heretics as a performative gesture. It was a way to show their neighbors that the Popedom was ready for battle and unwilling to submit, despite the fact that the Empire of Nyrnal had rejected their alliance and that they were ever-threatened by the legion of monsters. It had all been just for show, certainly.

No... The truth ran much deeper. With the loss of their creditor, the Dukedom of Schtraut, the Popedom was now free of its debts. However, that also meant the Dukedom wasn't there to lend any more money.

While the Eastern Trade Union was a wealthy nation, it dared not lend Frantz a thing after what had happened to Schtraut. Its merchants were perfectly happy to be stingy with their coffers if it meant they wouldn't be abandoned and devoured by monsters.

Additionally, the Popedom had denounced the Eastern Trade Union all too many times, proclaiming that the latter nation's conduct was an affront to God. This of course meant that the people of the Eastern Trade Union detested Frantz. Both the leaders of the country and its citizens viewed the Popedom as an enemy.

Yet the Popedom was in dire need of funds. Faced with the threats of the Empire of Nyrnal and the monsters from Schtraut, their military needed money. And the clergy, who lived in luxury, also required financial support.

Hence, Paris had ordered an inquisition—one that stole wealth from any affluent citizens who weren't part of the clergy. These people would be condemned as heretics and burned at the stake while the inquisitors confiscated all their funds and assets. Moreover, since the inquisition forbade all manner of luxuries, the country's expenses would also lessen.

The heretic hunt was both an act meant to show off to the surrounding countries and a method of stabilizing the Popedom's economy. Thus, Paris never expected that he himself would be accused of heresy. As a high-ranking member of the clergy, he also believed his funds would be protected. After all, this wasn't really a matter of faith or piety to begin with; it was a practical solution to a problem.

"Erm, very well... We will round up our remaining naval forces and invade the Dukedom's former territories. I am all in favor of dealing with the monstrous menace, I assure you." His tail between his legs, Paris agreed to go ahead with the operation as a way to placate the other cardinals.

"And since you were the one to come up with the plan, I say we entrust you with its execution. You will draft the operation and take full responsibility for it," said one cardinal.

"I agree. I expect much from his endeavors. I'm sure he will come up with a wonderful operation and drive the insects out of the Dukedom," added another.

A sense of dread settled in the pit of Paris' stomach. He already believed that using the navy to invade Schtraut was a lost cause, but the other cardinals didn't seem to understand that. They earnestly believed in this impossible

dream of victory.

“I will do everything in my power to succeed, but do keep in mind that luck can be a major factor when it comes to war. I implore you not to forget this,” Paris said, knowing how likely he was to fail.

“How could luck ever work against you when the God of Light is on your side? Do you not believe in His protection, Cardinal Pamphilj?” One of the cardinals glared at him.

“Well, err, of course I do.”

“Then it’s decided. We expect good news, Cardinal.”

Trepidation still churning in his gut, Paris meekly returned to his office.

“I am the right hand of the pope, yet even *I’m* being threatened by the inquisition?!” he shouted, slamming his fist against his desk. “This is wrong! This is all wrong! I can’t possibly be a heretic! I have given *everything* to the God of Light! How could I be a traitor to the faith?!”

He had done all this in order to secure the nation’s wealth and improve international relations. The idea that he could be regarded as a heretic was absurd. This inquisition was evolving into something too different from what he’d originally planned.

The original inquisition that had taken place during Frantz’s dark ages had been conducted to compel faith in the God of Light. This one was different; it was but one scene in a larger political play. It just so happened that it also helped whittle down Frantz’s population just as it was growing a bit too large.

Schtraut’s refugees and merchants, driven out of the Eastern Trade Union, sought refuge in the Popedom in large numbers, making it more of a bazaar than a religious center. Paris had pushed for the inquisition in hopes that Frantz’s reputation would worsen, making it much less attractive as a sanctuary. However, he had never anticipated that it would come back to bite him like this.

“That’s it... I’ve got no choice.” Paris reached out and rang a bell on his desk.

Right away, a nun walked into the room. “What is it, Your Eminence?”

“Call the head of the Mystical Research Division. Tell him it’s urgent.”

Half an hour later, this very man arrived at Paris' office.

"I've heard there may be some urgent business to attend to, Your Eminence. What could be weighing so heavily upon your shoulders?"

"I want you to look into Lord Bernardelli, the man in charge of the Department of Punition. Dig up a scandal... any scandal you can find. No matter how minor it may be. Actually, scratch that. Find something *big*. I need to drag him down from his current position."

"Your Eminence, is this a personal request?"

The Department of Punition was the organization responsible for upholding the inquisition.

"I ask this in the name of the God of Light and for the sake of His Holiness Pope Benedictus III," Paris replied. "I've received information through my personal channels that Lord Bernardelli is using the inquisition to conduct corrupt activities behind our backs. My informants tell me he's been embezzling the assets of those who are punished."

"I see. A severe crime indeed, and it must be stopped." The head of the Mystical Research Division inclined his head. "We'll do everything in our power to investigate this matter."

Put simply, Paris was ordering this man to fabricate a story that would indict Bernardelli for corruption. Ever since he himself had been under suspicion, Paris had lost faith in the inquisition and was doing everything he could to avoid finding himself at the stake. At his core, he was a complete and utter coward.

"We'll get started right away, then. It should take no more than three or four weeks for our investigation to bear fruit."

"Excellent. You are dismissed."

Paris felt he could now rest easy. Should the inquisitors lose their authority, his position as a cardinal, not to mention his life, would be safe and secure.

"I should make one more play, just to be on the safe side," he mused aloud.

He then proceeded to call upon a second guest: Lord Bernardelli.

Six months had passed since Maëlys started working at Gina's and Frederico's bakery, and she was now practically family to them. She worked her hardest, always serving their customers with a bright smile on her face, which did wonders to light up these dark times for anyone who saw it. Thanks to that, she had become something of a local celebrity.

One day, Frederico found Maëlys passionately writing a letter.

"Whatcha writing there, Maëlys?"

"Oh, a letter to my parents. They're in a refugee camp near the border."

"I didn't know you could read and write. That's impressive."

"The priest in the church near where I used to live taught me, but I only know a little."

The literacy rate in this world was fairly low. No matter the country, most commoners only knew how to read what was absolutely essential for their day-to-day lives.

"What're you telling them?"

"Just how nice it is working in your bakery! Truth be told, I was the only one who got a permit to leave the refugee camp, so I came all the way here by myself. I figured my parents might be worried about me."

The Popedom accepted refugees from Schtraut under the order of Pope Benedictus III, but the number of people allowed into the country was limited. The authorities were worried that if too many refugees were to flood into the country, they might disturb the public order or provide cover for enemies to sneak in. Indeed, refugees who couldn't find employment often had to resort to petty crime in order to survive. As such, the Popedom was cautious with how many people it was willing to let in.

Once the Popedom had been bombarded with requests from families looking to enter the country, it permitted one family member to cross the border. As such, many refugees who made it into Frantz had to live far away from their loved ones.

"Maëlys has been writing letters every day. Haven't you noticed?" Gina asked.

“Really? I had no idea.”

In fact, most of Maëlys’ modest wages were spent on remittance and postal fees.

“You know what? We’ll pay your postal fees from now on. It’s only natural you’d worry about your family in these circumstances. Business has been booming thanks to you, so it’s the least we can do.”

“What? No! I wouldn’t dream of asking such a thing! It’s my problem, after all...”

“Oh, hush. You’re part of our family now, Maëlys.”

Even in this savage world, people reached out to one another, filled with kindness and sympathy.

“Excuse me.”

Their conversation was interrupted by someone at the front of the bakery.

“Yes? I’m sorry, but we’re already closed for the day,” Frederico said, turning to face their guest.

“Oh, I see. And here I’d just heard the sugar buns you sell are to die for.”

Standing there was a fourteen-year-old girl, accompanied by a female knight wearing a full suit of armor. They were gazing at the pastries on display with a bitter expression on their faces.

“Oh, my apologies. We don’t serve sugar buns anymore. It’s considered *heresy*.” Frederico’s tongue soured on the word “heresy,” as though he couldn’t bear to get it out.

“Pastries are heresy now? Well, isn’t that something. What is this world coming to?” the girl replied, a small smirk on her lips. “By the way, is that little lady there your daughter? Hmm, perhaps not, judging by your hair colors...”

“No, Maëlys is an employee here. She’s like a daughter to us, though,” Frederico replied warmly.

“Oh, all right, then. Well, since you’re not selling those buns, I guess I came here for nothing. Let’s bounce, Sérignan.”

With that, the two left the bakery.

“The inquisition’s really doing a number on this country, isn’t it?”

“So it seems, Your Majesty.”

The ones who had visited Frederico’s bakery were none other than Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea, and her loyal knight, Sérignan.

“They’re executing their own subjects in large numbers. At this rate, the whole country will collapse on its own even if we just kick back and watch. Not that it’s my intention to do so.”

Grevillea took a long look at the capital city.

“Saania sure is pretty. Almost feels bad to ruin it. But we’re going to tear it down completely, for we are the Arachnea.”

The queen turned and left Saania behind. And while she was scouting out the enemy territory, things were beginning to move within Schtraut’s territories as well.



“So, the enemy’s going to launch an attack on our shores with what’s left of their navy?” Roland asked.

“That’s what it looks like,” said Lysa.

He let out a groan. “I guess the pirates couldn’t hold them off completely.”

“Well, umm, Her Majesty says their chances of pulling off an invasion are slim now that we’ve gotten rid of a bunch of ’em!” Lysa was doing her best to sound encouraging.

“I see. I’m sure this is more of a political move than anything else.” He paused to pick up some information from the queen through the collective consciousness. “Oh dear, our queen can be cruel sometimes.”

Only the Arachnea was aware that half the people in the Cardinals’ Council were currently controlled by Parasite Swarms. The queen had used the infected cardinals to lay a trap for Paris Pamphilj. Paris had hastily agreed to go through with the landing operation despite the fact that neither the general of the

ground forces nor the admiral of the navy believed it was a good idea. They had few ships deployed at sea, and many of the surviving crew members were terrified of the monsters and refused to take part in the mission.

Word of the massacre in Fennelia was spreading, and the sailors were terribly shaken by it all. Seeing the dismembered remains and puddles of flesh had caused them bouts of vomiting and endless quivers. They couldn't imagine what sort of enemy could do that to human beings.

Nevertheless, Paris was about to proceed with the naval operation. He was willingly sacrificing their soldiers and sailors in order to preserve his honor and save his skin.

"What's our objective?" Lysa asked.

"We're to intercept the enemy. Frantz's forces are planning to anchor at the old capital, Doris. They know their navy isn't strong enough to invade all of Schtraut, so they'll try to retake just the capital. At the very least, they're hoping for a symbolic victory."

The enemy's sights were fixed on Doris, which happened to be precisely where Lysa and Roland were having this conversation.

"Her Majesty is occupied with her scouting mission, so it falls to us to handle things here," he added.

"It's a good thing we have Her Majesty's orders to rely on. As long as we follow them, we've got this in the bag."

At the moment, their queen was observing the enemy's movements from the inside. Roland's group was left to guard Schtraut and handle the incoming invasion.

"If we follow through with this, I pity what'll become of the enemy."

"Yeah, but they deserve it. Even if they're pitiful soldiers out on a hopeless operation," said Lysa.

If successful, the queen's plan would deliver the enemy a crushing blow.

"You're right. Anyone who opposes the Arachnea deserves to suffer. And honestly, the thought of Frantz's men waltzing into my homeland as if they own

the place really irks me.”

Frantz had promised to help the Dukedom of Schtraut but only betrayed it instead. Thinking about those turncoats marching into Schtraut greatly annoyed Roland. It was as if they were finally making good on their promise to the Dukedom... only far too late.

“Let’s give ’em all we’ve got, Roland!” Lysa chirped.

“Yes. In Her Majesty’s name.”

Soon after, the Masquerade Swarms hidden in Frantz reported that the Popedom’s fleet had finally sailed. The journey from Frantz’s naval base to Doris would take roughly two days. Within that time frame, Roland and Lysa would make their preparations for the upcoming operation...

And this operation hinged on the debut of a new unit the Arachnea had secretly unlocked.



At this very moment, the Popedom’s navy was sailing toward Doris, capital of the former Dukedom of Schtraut. Frantz had deployed its precious large transport ships, which ferried a force of 5,000 men. If things worked out as they hoped, this army would be large enough to retake Doris.

The Arachnea’s queen scoffed at the idea. Not only had the enemy sent a mere 5,000 men, but they bore light arms and armor. With such armaments, they would be butchered by even a lesser force of Ripper Swarms. Aside from that, the soldiers had no idea that a trap had been laid for them in Doris.

“Looks clear so far, sir!” reported one of the sailors. “At this rate, we should be able to stage a landing without incident.”

“We mustn’t be careless, though,” replied the admiral of the fleet. “There’s no telling what might happen, given that the enemy is mostly unknown to us.”

He had seen the massacre in Fennelia. How citizens and soldiers alike had been torn to shreds or melted into puddles of fleshy ooze. Therefore, the admiral knew that the enemies they were up against were beyond human comprehension.

The foul stench. The sight of people being dissolved into liquid. The screams and cries of people begging to be spared. It had been a nightmare. They were now up against true terror—fear incarnate capable of indiscriminate massacre.

While the admiral wasn't sure how he'd survived the slaughter in Fennelia, he would soon come to learn a simple truth: one cannot escape the clutches of the grim reaper.

"But sir, the enemy doesn't have a navy. They can't harm us until we land."

"And despite not having a navy, they destroyed Fennelia." Glaring at his subordinate, the admiral shook his head.

Their enemy might have been a legion of monsters, but those monsters were still capable of using ships. If they went to battle without considering this caveat, they would surely suffer a terrible blow.

"Sailor! Any signs of trouble ahead?!"

"Yes, sir! I can see a number of small vessels floating near our landing point!"

"Small vessels, you say...?"

"The enemy may have used them to attack Doris. Maybe they got desperate and thought to use them to block our path."

"That's the only thing I can think of, too. Those small vessels can't do anything to us otherwise."

As terrifying as the monsters themselves were, they wouldn't be able to stop Frantz's proud navy with boats so tiny they practically could be pushed over. Even if there happened to be monsters hiding inside, they'd sink once the fleet's ships bashed into the vessels. At least, that was what the naval crew believed.

But when one of the Popedom's ships rammed into a little boat, a loud explosion erupted on the water as the boat blew up. The large ship that had been caught in the blast began to sink. As it sank, the ship behind it bumped into it, damaged its keel, and started sinking as well.

It wasn't just *one* of the small boats that exploded; the others began bursting one by one, and despite the sailors' attempts to steer clear of them, the large

ships took serious damage. The shockwaves sent the men flying overboard and into the water. As flames overtook the water's surface, the drowning men floundered, begging for help.

"What is the meaning of this?! What the hell is going on here?!" exclaimed the admiral as he gaped at the sinking ships.

They were currently under attack by the Arachnea's brand-new units: Fire Swarms. A Fire Swarm possessed two abilities. First, it could spew a high-temperature gas at the enemy. The attack was powerful, but its damage per second was low. If an Arachnea player wasn't careful, her Fire Swarms might be killed before they could defeat the enemy.

Secondly, this Swarm could self-destruct. It shared this ability with the Masquerade Swarm but far exceeded it in sheer firepower. One burst could easily destroy an enemy's defensive fortifications.

This was the unit Queen Grevillea had prepared for this battle. The Fire Swarms had been employed as mines to prevent the enemy fleet from landing. This sort of action wasn't available in the game, but Grevillea had improvised for a real-world strategy.

While it meant that all these Swarms would be sacrificed, self-destruction was an inherent part of their value to begin with. Taking away the thing they did best would be the worst insult imaginable. To that end, she chose to give them this chance to show off their value as a final parting gift.

"Half the enemy vessels have sunk," Roland said quietly, watching the Fire Swarms wreak havoc on Frantz's navy.

Doris' shores were the very picture of hell. No matter where one looked, ships were sinking, burning, and colliding against other ships. The naval fleet now had less than half its original numbers.

"It looks like they're still going to try to land. They're lowering boats into the water," Lysa said, her keen eyes catching every move the enemy made.

"Indeed. Those fools still intend to go through with it," remarked Roland, peering through his binoculars. "Are we ready to repel them, Miss Lysa?"

"Yep, we sure are."

The elven girl already had a flaming arrow fixed to her bow, and she was taking aim at the enemy boats.

“Open fire, then.”

“You got it, Roland!” Lysa said, letting the arrow loose.

Her arrow hit the first boat, which caught fire almost immediately. The sailors on board scrambled to scoop up water and put out the fire, but they were quickly and unceremoniously sniped by Lysa. In no time at all, the boat burned and sank into the water.

Ever since becoming a Swarm, Lysa’s marksmanship had noticeably improved. She could easily pull back the strings of bows the size of ballistas, and she was capable of shooting massive arrows in sets of three, killing three targets with each shot.

Frantz’s already-cornered navy was then assaulted by a barrage of stingers from Toxic Swarms. The lightly armored troops were easily pierced by the projectiles, and they melted into puddles of molten flesh.

“I’ll deal with anyone you and the Toxic Swarms don’t kill,” Roland told Lysa.

The landing operation continued even under heavy fire. Now that the chain of command had crumbled, there was no one to call off the attack. But any sailors who landed on Doris’ shores were intercepted by Roland and a force of Ripper Swarms. The sailors were no match for them, and Roland’s longsword quickly cut down the troops.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Roland, too, had grown stronger after becoming a Swarm. His slashes cut the enemy sailors in half, and even when they tried to fight back, he easily dodged their swipes and defeated them. Frantz’s men fell dead one after another, their corpses littering Doris’ shores. Before long, the landing force of 5,000 was reduced to a mere handful of survivors. Backs to the sea, they aimed their weapons in every direction, unable to surrender.

“If you abhor this turn of events, blame the one who ordered you to take up this hopeless battle in the first place,” Roland said coldly. A split second later, he and the Ripper Swarms finished them off.

Thus, the battle came to an end. The admiral, who had counted his blessings for escaping death, now slumbered in the bosom of the sea.

“We’re finished on this end, Roland,” Lysa reported.

“Yes... I believe they’ve learned their lesson, albeit the hard way.”

The attack staged by Frantz’s navy had ended in total failure. Naturally, it would be Paris who would have to answer for it... but he’d already taken measures to shirk this responsibility.



“Cardinal Pamphilj! How do you intend to atone for this crushing defeat?!”

In the next Cardinals’ Council, the other cardinals demanded that Paris take responsibility for the failed landing operation.

“I don’t believe I’m at fault here,” Paris said flatly. “My plan was perfect. It only failed because someone leaked the details to an outside force. In other words, what sealed the navy’s fate was espionage.”

Paris then turned his gaze toward Lord Bernardelli, head of the Department of Punition, prompting the man to speak.

“According to our reports, a spy has infiltrated Saania,” Lord Bernardelli explained. “They’ve been sending letters to the border, leaking information about our internal proceedings every day. We are currently investigating the matter, but there can be no doubt that this is the work of a heretic.”

“There you have it. The problem lies with the Department of Punition, who failed to discover the spy. In addition, I’ve got proof that Lord Bernardelli was appropriating goods and funds confiscated by the inquisitors. I’ve tasked the Mystical Research Division with investigating the matter; their report is here for your perusal.”

Paris snapped his fingers, after which a few nuns entered the room and distributed documents among the other cardinals.

“What?! Lord Bernardelli, you’ve taken *this* much money from the inquisition?!” one of the cardinals cried, incredulous.

“N-No! I didn’t! This is defamation!” Lord Bernardelli called as he shrank back

in surprise.

“Now that I’m sure the cause of our defeat is clear to you,” Paris said, smiling with satisfaction, “I must remind you that I am not to blame.”

“Lord Bernardelli, have you discovered the identity of the spy?!”

“Yes! Yes, of course! We at the Department of Punition are staunch believers in the God of Light, and thanks to His guidance, we’ve found the spy. This heretic is the cause of all our troubles!”

“Then Cardinal Pamphilj need not be held accountable for this fiasco?”

“Nay, Cardinal. The navy’s failure is not my fault,” Paris asserted. He was desperately hoping to escape punishment. “We must burn this spy and have them pay for their sins. After that, we must make preparations for our next battle. Unfortunately, the enemy has grown stronger, and our fleet has been destroyed. Another maritime assault will be impossible, so we will have to stage a land invasion. Any objections?”

The other cardinals bitterly shook their heads.

“We will investigate the matter of Lord Bernardelli’s embezzlement at a later date,” said one of them.

“I’ve done nothing of the sort!” Lord Bernardelli protested.

“Now, now,” said Paris, wagging a finger. “I believe we can call this council adjourned. We must unite as we strive for victory. For now, we will execute the spy. And until we can ascertain to what degree the accusations toward Lord Bernardelli are true, we will suspend all other activities regarding the inquisition.”

Thus, Paris escaped responsibility for his actions. All the blame was pinned on Lord Bernardelli and the alleged spy. Inevitably, however, things did not end so smoothly...



In Saania’s main plaza, the inquisition was punishing an accused heretic.

“This heretic has conspired with an enemy to the faith, endangering us all! She will pay for her sins as she is purged in the fires of God’s anger!” So

declared the white-robed inquisitors as they dragged their victim out into the open.

“You’re wrong! I’m not a heretic! I believe in the God of Light!”

The one being condemned for heresy was none other than the young Maëlys. Her hands were bound in chains, and her clothes had been torn off. She was being forced to stumble naked to the stake in the center of the plaza.

“Wait! You’re wrong! She only wrote letters to her family!” Frederico cried out in protest.

“That’s right! She’s not a heretic!” Gina shouted.

They knew her letters were being sent to her parents in the refugee camp by the border, and so they were confident that these charges were false.

“Shut up, or you’ll be tried for heresy as well!” an inquisitor barked at them.

“Ngh...” Frederico took a step back.

A crowd of people was gathered around the plaza, each person also questioning the impending execution.

“Is that sweet girl really a spy...?”

“How does a bakery employee have access to military secrets to begin with?”

Everyone had come to doubt one another, and as the definition of who deserved execution became progressively more vague, they had grown to fear and suspect the inquisition as a whole.

All the while, their friends, neighbors, and family members were burned at the stake. Thus, they began to wonder... *Is this really right? Is this how things should be?*

“Quiet! All of you, silence!” screeched an inquisitor, putting a stop to the murmurs and whispers. “We will now execute the heretic!”

He then pulled out a sharp blade.

“No! Nooo!” Maëlys screamed.

“We will lay bare your true, tainted nature for all to see, heretic!”

Holding Maëlys down as she struggled to escape her bonds, the inquisitor tore into her skin. Thick beads of blood poured down to the ground, soaking into the earth. The inquisitor then reached his hand into the wound and began forcibly pulling her skin off through the tear.

“Aaah, it hurts, it hurts, aaAahHh!” Maëlys’ agonized, animalistic howls echoed throughout the plaza.

“Behold!” the inquisitor said as her bright-red flesh became exposed. “This is the true nature of this heretic!”

“Stop it! This is horrible...!” Frederico shouted as Gina sobbed openly beside him.

“We will now put this heretic to the torch!” The inquisitor began tying Maëlys to a pillar. There was dry brush piled up at its base to provide kindling.

“Light the fire!” On the inquisitor’s order, the kindling was lit.

“Aaaah, it’s hot! It burns! It buuurns! Help me! Mother...! Fatheeeeer!”

The flames lapped at Maëlys’ small form, scorching her flesh and pulling her closer to death. At first, she struggled to breathe, and then her body broke out in blisters that swelled and burst. Her senses gradually left her as her consciousness faded.

It took thirty minutes for Maëlys to die, and she suffered through every single second of it.

“This concludes the execution! May you continue worshiping the God of Light!” With that, the inquisitor walked away, leaving Maëlys’ burned corpse on the stake. The citizens weren’t even allowed to take her body down and mourn her. It would count as helping a heretic, marking the guilty party as the inquisition’s next target. As such, Maëlys’ remains would be left to the crows and wild dogs until it came time for someone else’s execution, as if to say that was fitting punishment for a heretic.

“Maëlys...” Frederico murmured.

“Awful... This is too awful...” Gina said, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

The two of them stood before Maëlys’ body, weeping.

But that day, the inquisition suddenly stopped, and the next execution never came. While the citizens of Frantz didn't know this at the time, it was because the Department of Punition had fallen into a state of disarray.



"I did not embezzle a single thing! All of the confiscated items and funds were placed in the national treasury!" declared Bernardelli, head of the Department of Punition.

He had been led to an interrogation room, and now the questioning was taking place.

"Enough with your lies! We have evidence right here! All told, five million istas are missing! Who could have taken that sum if not the inquisition?!"

An interrogation officer from the Mystical Research Division was in charge of confronting him. The matter of Bernardelli's embezzlement was actually a major issue for the Popedom. Members of the Mystical Research Division had discovered that the funds in the national treasury didn't match the records of what had been confiscated from heretics, and thus they concluded that someone with access to the vaults must have misappropriated the lost property. Bernardelli firmly denied any and all involvement, claiming his inquisitors had done nothing of the sort.

His denial was only natural; the documents leveraged as proof against him had all been fabricated by the Mystical Research Division itself. The organization had altered the documents to list more wealth than had actually been confiscated from heretics. In so doing, they made it seem as if someone was embezzling those funds.

"How obstinate! Perhaps we should have the inquisition hold a trial against you next?"

"N-No!"

Bernardelli knew full well just how terrifying the inquisition was. After all, it was on his orders that so many people had been flayed alive and burned at the stake. Their pained screams and ghastly remains were vivid in his memory. By no means was he going to let that happen to him.

“Right, then I’ll ask you once more. Did you embezzle those funds?”

“No, of course not! But if there is any suspicion that I have, I will step down from my post immediately!” Bernardelli replied in a panic.

“So you insist on your innocence... Very well. Retire, then. You’ve done something unforgivable, but if you’re willing to repent, the God of Light will show you His mercy.” The interrogation officer’s face broke out in a thin, serpentine smile.

After that, Bernardelli was released. Later that day, he submitted a letter of resignation, relinquishing his role as the head of the Department of Punition. His successor was, of course, none other than Paris Pamphilj.

Paris had arranged all this to ensure he would never be cornered again. He no longer had to fear being burned at the stake, and now all those who’d threatened him would go on to fear him.

“With this, the inquisition cannot be turned against me,” Paris said triumphantly, sitting in his office. He then heaved a sigh of relief.

However, he had forgotten that the inquisition was not his only threat. The Arachnea was still at large. While Paris had been the star of his own concocted farce, the Arachnea was preparing for war. It would not be long before the faction’s terrifying power would be unleashed.

And when that time came, the Popedom of Frantz would be wiped off the face of the world. Just like the Kingdom of Maluk and the Dukedom of Schtraut before it.

The countdown to Frantz’s demise relentlessly ticked on.

Preemptive Attack

With the naval assault having ended in failure, Frantz's only remaining choice was to march on Schtraut with ground forces. The Popedom had an army of 250,000 men at its disposal, including the allied forces, and it was planning to send all of them into battle.

"They're coming," I said, standing in the forward operating base we'd built between the two countries.

"But we just thwarted them not too long ago," Lysa pointed out.

"They'll be bringing in the allied army this time, the one they assembled during the International Council. They have a total of two hundred and fifty thousand men, cavalry and infantry. Actually, you could say their entire army is built around their heavy infantry. The enemy is learning, and they realize that using lightly armored troops against us is pointless."

In other words, the enemy had upgraded their units, too. They'd bolstered their forces with heavy infantrymen as a countermeasure to the Ripper Swarms. The Ripper Swarms were meant for early rushes, and they struggled to keep up with more advanced units. They couldn't penetrate the enemy's armor and were easily beaten by stronger, more powerful weapons.

"Can we handle them, Your Majesty?" Lysa asked.

"We'll be fine. I figured this would happen, and that's why I've upgraded our units. These new units will take the vanguard instead of the Ripper Swarms, which will be relegated to patrols and recon."

Ripper Swarm rushes were only viable for a short portion of the game. The Swarms themselves were easy to mass-produce, but in exchange, they were somewhat frail. Thus, I had done a little upgrading. Thanks to all the time we'd spent fighting Maluk and Schtraut and cooperating with the pirates, we'd had plenty of time to unlock said units and more than enough meat for their production.

“First, we’ll crush the enemy’s offensive. Our walls aren’t as sturdy as they look, and they’ll be able to break through if they bring out siege weapons. But the walls are only there to stall them; once they break through, the real battle begins.”

The fighting at the walls likely wouldn’t take too long. If they’d brought 250,000 soldiers, they would break down our defenses in no time. With the walls in their way, we could buy some time, locate their point of invasion, and concentrate our forces there.

“Unfortunately, our upgraded units aren’t as fast as the Ripper Swarms, so using the walls to stall the enemy is a must. We can also whittle them down with the Toxic Swarms.”

I had Toxic Swarms stationed in the Eyeball Spires so they could shower incoming enemies with their stingers. Of course, if the enemy were to bring siege weapons and use them to attack the Eyeball Spires, they wouldn’t last long.

“Now then, this will be a match between their two hundred and fifty thousand troops and our four hundred thousand. I look forward to seeing who wins.”

While victory seemed to be in reach, I couldn’t allow myself to be careless. I had promised the Swarm that we would win, so I had to do everything I could to ensure that we emerged victorious. I still didn’t know what sort of victory they desired, but I knew what they considered defeat: the extinction of their kind.

With that in mind, it was time for our next battle.



The allied army, led by Frantz’s forces, was heading north. 250,000 men marched toward the border walls, their boots loudly stomping on the ground as they went.

A few Masquerade Swarms, hidden among the refugee camps at the border, kept an eye on the enemy army’s advance.

“For the God of Light!”

“For the God of Light!”

Crazy fanatics. If you love your god so much, I'll happily send you straight to him, I thought.

Our enemy struck in the northeast. They rolled out battering rams and set up catapults as they prepared to invade. I had the Toxic Swarms fire at their engineers, but they worked too fast; it seemed we wouldn't be able to stop them in time.

“For the God of Light!”

Frantz's men began pushing the battering rams toward the walls and shooting their catapults at the Eyeball Spires. After ten or so shots, the towers fell apart, and the Toxic Swarms inside were crushed under the rubble.

The battering rams smashed through the walls, and with the Eyeball Spires destroyed, there was nothing to stop them. The Toxic Swarms' venom was only effective against living creatures, anyway, so they wouldn't have been much use against the mechanical siege weapons.

Now the enemy was knocking on our door.

Ahh, if only they knew what's waiting on the other side.

“We've broken through the walls! Charge!”

The soldiers pulled back the battering rams and rushed through the opening they'd created. Row after row of troops poured into our territory.

Had I set Ripper Swarms here as our vanguard, they would've been quickly dispatched. The Toxic Swarms, standing behind them, would have been destroyed soon after, and our formation would have crumbled. Their exoskeletons would have been crunched in, their fangs and scythes snapped like twigs.

But thankfully, none of that came to pass.

“First infantry formation has crossed the walls!”

“Wait... What the hell is that?!”

The soldiers' expressions contorted in disbelief.

Oh yes, now those are the faces I wanted to see.

Upon storming through the walls, the heavy infantrymen were greeted by several large Swarms with dense, weighty exoskeletons. They had curled fangs like a centipede, and their limbs ended in scythe-like blades that stabbed into the ground. Essentially, these units were the Swarm equivalent of heavy tanks.

They were the upgraded version of the Ripper Swarm: the Genocide Swarm. As its name implied, this type of Swarm was meant for slaughtering the enemy in large numbers, no matter what that enemy might be.

“Genocide Swarms, forward!” I ordered. “Give our enemies your regards in the only way you can—kill them!”

The Genocide Swarms began their charge, and the Toxic Swarms behind them provided covering fire. The stingers didn’t do much to the heavily armored soldiers, but the occasional stinger penetrated the metal and reduced the victim to a pool of gore. I could see the fear these attacks struck in the hearts of the other soldiers, slowing them down. Things were going swimmingly.

Now that the heavy infantrymen were rooted to the spot, frozen with fear, the Genocide Swarms overwhelmed them. With their fangs, the new Swarms cut through the enemy all too easily; they were so strong that they could bisect a man’s body with a single bite. Their power was on display for all to see.

“Help m—” One man couldn’t even finish his scream as his upper half was swiftly separated from the rest of his body.

The soldiers’ metallic armor screeched unpleasantly as it was torn apart. As the men were literally ripped in two, the sticky sounds of their flesh tearing like rubber could be heard all over the battlefield.

“Don’t let them scare you! Fight! For the God of Light!”

“For the God of Light!”

Still, the infantry fought back against the Genocide Swarms. The halberds and greatswords they wielded would’ve been effective against Ripper Swarms, but they did very little to the upgraded version. Even when repeatedly bludgeoned by a steel weapon, the Genocide Swarms continued their composed attacks.

“Their defense is on another level,” I mused. “Those men have no chance.”

There was a huge gap in defense between the Ripper and Genocide Swarms. Naturally, the increase in defense came at the cost of speed. The Genocide Swarms were slow and bulky, which was their major flaw. Or perhaps the Ripper Swarms just moved so fast that the Genocide Swarms looked sluggish in comparison?

“Your Majesty, the enemy is retreating from the walls. What shall we do?” Sérignan asked.

“We move forward and give chase. We’ll show them the power of the Arachnea.”

Onward, onward! Onward to Saania, where Isabelle’s killers are. Let the military cadence be played for our march! The surge of death called the Swarm will soon be upon our foes!



“Fall back! Retreat! Go, go, go!” shouted one of Frantz’s officers.

The soldiers who’d stormed through the walls had been massacred. Faced with those terrifying monsters, the remaining men had no choice but to run for their lives. Their attacks didn’t so much as scratch the enemy, which had torn the soldiers apart without even flinching as the heavy weapons struck them again and again.

“I did not give you permission to retreat!” barked an inquisitor, thrusting a saber into the officer’s throat.

“What are you doing?! Do you want all of us to die?!” another officer cried out.

“We have the God of Light’s blessing on our side! We cannot lose.” The inquisitor pulled his bloodied blade out of the man’s body. “Anyone who says we will be defeated is a heretic, and heretics will be met with death. Onward, I say! We must take Schtraut back from the clutches of these abominations!”

The inquisitor took over for the officer and started giving instructions to the soldiers. Confused as they were, the soldiers abided by his commands. Yet all

that lay ahead of them was death; advancing meant willingly marching into their own graves.

“Go forth, for the God of Light!”

“The bugs are crossing the walls!”

But while the mad inquisitor continued barking his orders, the Genocide Swarms and Toxic Swarms came after them. As they approached, the Genocide Swarms tore into the heavy infantry with their fangs. The Toxic Swarms clambered over the walls, shooting off their projectiles and turning anyone they hit into puddles of goo.

“Archers! Open fire!”

Crossbowmen were deployed to engage the Swarms’ advance. They fired thick bolts at the Genocide Swarms all at once, successfully managing to fell a few.

But the Genocide Swarms behind them climbed right over their comrades’ bodies, and at the same time the Toxic Swarms finished crossing the walls.

“Keep firing! Victory is o—” Just as the inquisitor was proclaiming their victory, a Toxic Swarm’s stinger pierced through his chest.

He was assailed by indescribable pain and quickly fell to the ground. In mere moments, he had completely melted into liquified flesh.

“Are we really going to keep fighting?!”

“Those are our orders!”

As their commanders died one by one, the army’s chain of command was also falling apart. Many of the soldiers had even seen their officers cut down by inquisitors for ordering retreats. And all the while, the Arachnea’s queen snickered where no one could see her.

“Oh, the enemy’s certainly divided, aren’t they?” she said, her tone ecstatic. “There are lunatics who believe in their god and sane people who don’t. Perhaps I should thank Paris for giving the inquisitors so much authority.”

The queen then turned her eyes to the Swarms engaged in battle. She watched them with a mixture of joy and sorrow as they crushed the enemy and

perished from the crossbow bolts.

“Those crossbows are annoying. And their archers are heavily armored, too, so the Toxic Swarms can’t take them out. Oh well. Winning with numbers is the Swarm’s style, I suppose.”

There was no need for a change in plans. The Swarms continued their rush into the enemy’s formation with the Toxic Swarms raining their venomous stingers on enemy lines. Every once in a while, an unfortunate crossbowman took a hit in the flesh and quickly melted.

As ever, the Arachnea’s charge was relentless. The Genocide Swarms cut through the enemy’s front lines while the Toxic Swarms dropped soldiers in the rear guard. This surge of death, this black tidal wave washed over the border walls to drown the soldiers beyond.

The soldiers couldn’t hold the Swarms back and were thus reduced to corpses in a heartbeat. Those who survived began thinking less like an army and more like a frenzied mob. All the conflicting orders and agendas drove them to act erratically. Some tried to retreat while others thought to charge, and others still tried to simply hold their ground and prevent the enemy from moving forward.

It was complete chaos.

“Your Majesty, what shall we do next?” Sérignan asked.

“You know, the classic move would be to overwhelm them with our numbers, but I feel like doing that alone would be terribly tasteless,” the queen replied. “If we force our way into the rear guard and kill their commander, they’ll lose their line of communication. *Then* we can surround them. Sérignan, Lysa, Roland—I want you three to join the battle.”

The vanguard force, which consisted of Genocide Swarms, was already closing in on the commander in the back row, who was desperately trying to regain control of the army. His death would be the last nail in the coffin of the enemy’s pecking order, and then it would be all too easy to back the rest of the soldiers into a corner. That was the Arachnea Queen’s plan.

“By your will, Your Majesty. We will take to the vanguard at once,” Sérignan said with a bow.

“Leave it to us,” Roland added.

The two of them quickly sprinted ahead, catching up to the other Swarms, while Lysa hung back and shot down anyone who tried to flee. Before long, Sérignan had severed the commander’s head, and the battle came to its effective conclusion. With their line of communication severed, half of the enemy’s army—roughly 120,000 troops—was surrounded by the Genocide and Toxic Swarms. As that deadly circle tightened around them, the soldiers’ fate was sealed.

“All right, now it’s time to put our tricks aside and squash them.”

Frantz’s zealous inquisitors had been too confident in their army’s meager equipment upgrades. They would suffer the consequences at the hands of the Arachnea, which continually built up its strength.

There was no one to save them now.

After that battle, the allied army completely collapsed. All its surviving soldiers fled back to their countries, and the rest of Frantz’s own men were forced to retreat. It would go down in history as one of the fastest, most cowardly and unsightly retreats by any army on the continent.



At this moment, the Popedom’s remaining soldiers were running away from the border, the Swarm hot on their trail. There was only one problem left for me to deal with: the refugees. Those who’d managed to flee the Dukedom in the midst of our conquest were now huddled in camps near the border between Frantz and Schtraut.

“What do we do about these guys...?” I wondered aloud, gazing at them from a little ways off.

“Perhaps we could reduce them to mincemeat? The Arachnea is always in need of it,” Sérignan suggested.

“We could, but indiscriminately killing refugees doesn’t sit well with me.”

Those people had only fled Schtraut because of the needless fight that idiot Leopold had picked with us. They didn’t have a home to go back to... And

admittedly, it was mostly my fault. Killing them and turning them into meatballs might've been the Swarm-y thing to do, but I didn't like the idea one bit.

Or rather, it didn't suit me because of the kind of people I'd associated with thus far. Linnet, the people of Marine, Isabelle... They wouldn't have approved of slaughtering homeless refugees. It would just be another case of the strong tormenting and killing the weak—the same way they'd met their own ends.

“Roland, I want you to make them an offer. If they want to go back to Schtraut, would they be willing to live under the Arachnea's rule?”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

I decided to leave this matter to Roland, since he was originally one of Schtraut's citizens. Roland approached the frightened refugees cowering nearby and called out to them.

“Men and women of Schtraut! Her Majesty, our benevolent Queen of the Arachnea, says she is willing to accept you into the Dukedom with open arms! Any who wish to return to their former homeland, raise your hands! We promise to do you no harm!”

The people of Schtraut had suffered enough already, and there was no need to torment them further. I decided to let them return to their homeland, where they might live out the rest of their lives and die in peace.

“I want to go back!”

“Me too!”

Schtraut's refugees raised their hands one after another.

“Very well. Welcome home,” I said, stepping forward. “Let us put the deaths of the war behind us and start a new relationship. A new future, where the Dukedom of Schtraut and the Arachnea work together.”

I gestured toward the opening in the walls made by the battering rams. I'd had the remains of the dead Swarms and soldiers removed, so with the exception of some blood on the grass, it led to a peaceful expanse of grassland beyond. It was a view of their homeland.

“Can we really live alongside these creatures...?”

“Better that than get executed by Frantz’s inquisition, I suppose...”

The fact that Frantz’s heretic hunt was driving the refugees to side with us seemed awfully ironic to me.

“Roland, please take care of the refugees who want to immigrate. We can’t let anything happen to them.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Recklessly accepting anyone and everyone could cause an assortment of problems, and so I left Roland to take care of the matter and filter the influx of refugees. The new Schtraut had no place for thieves or people with a grudge against the Arachnea.

“Well, that’s one problem solved. Let’s continue our march. We have a Popedom to cover with corpses and a capital to wash with blood.”

At my order, the Swarms resumed their pursuit of Frantz’s fleeing soldiers. For now, we would ignore the allied army and whoever else; they could be trampled later. Right now, we had our eyes fixed on Frantz.

Crush the Popedom of Frantz. Crush it, crush it, crush it.

The only forces Frantz had who were any threat were the crossbowmen and heavy infantry, and apparently we’d done away with every last one of them. Now all that was left were the lightly armored troops.

I began to firmly believe that this war would be an easy one. But, as my luck would have it, an intruder would soon step in to interfere with our plans.



We continued our advance into Frantz, taking over half the Popedom’s territory in the process. After slaughtering anyone we came across, we reduced our victims to meatballs, which were sent to the flesh depositories and Fertilization Furnaces in the FOB in order to add more troops to our ranks. Ripper Swarms served as scouts while the Toxic and Genocide Swarms made up the bulk of our forces.

I had assigned most of our units to our campaign against the Popedom as it was our primary objective at present.

“Our next obstacle is passing through the mountains.”

A vast mountain range spread out before us. These mountains divided Frantz into northern and southern regions, and the only way through was via a single paved road. Predictably, the Popedom’s army was blocking that road to impede our progress.

“We have no choice but to force our way through. We could ask the pirates to ferry us across the sea, but that would take too long and give our opponents too much time to prepare. And besides, if something were to happen to the ships, all the Swarms on board would drown.”

If the enemy realized we were using the pirate ships and decided to sink them, the Swarms would be lost to the depths in the blink of an eye. I couldn’t afford to lose my army of Genocide and Toxic Swarms this way after spending so much of our precious meat stores to create them.

That said, if we simply decided to charge in headfirst, we’d lose these units just the same. We needed a strategy.

“Maybe we don’t necessarily *have* to take the mountain road.”

Yes... If I recall correctly, during the Korean War...

“Genocide Swarms, break through the enemy’s formation. I’ll send you further instructions in a moment.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

“Toxic Swarms, I want you to shoot suppressing fire from the foot of the mountain. Keep the enemy pinned on the mountain road. I also want a separate force of Genocide Swarms to go around the mountains and create a diversion. In general, I want the enemy absolutely convinced we want to use that road.”

“Understood, Your Majesty,” the Toxic Swarms replied.

We needed to make sure the enemy didn’t understand our true intentions and stayed where they were.

“All right, get to it. Commence the operation.”

Would it go well? I wasn’t going to pray to that annoying God of Light, so I

instead directed my prayers to Oinari, the Japanese god of luck and good harvests.



The Popedom of Frantz was divided into northern and southern regions by the Indigo Mountains. At present, the sole road leading through the mountains was completely closed off by Frantz's military. Wooden fences were set along the road, and rocks had been rolled down the cliffs to block the way. At this point, the army had completely abandoned the refugees, citizens, and remaining soldiers who were still in the north.

"Anything out of the ordinary?" asked an officer. He was inspecting one of the companies handling the blockade.

"Everything's in order, Captain!" a young soldier chirped back.

"I hear your betrothed lives in Saania, soldier."

"Yes, and it's a real load off my shoulders. If she lived in the north, I'd have put my life on the line to go save her." The young man smiled.

"I'd bet you're itching to see her again, eh?"

"Frankly, sir, I really am. I wish this damnable war would just end already..."

The soldier's beloved was a waitress in a restaurant. They'd met when he was on an outing with the rest of his unit. It hadn't taken long for the well-mannered girl to open her heart to the soldier, and they had quickly become an item.

They'd been exchanging letters ever since the war broke out, and returning to her arms was the soldier's greatest mission. Naturally, he also wanted to keep her safe from the ruthless army of monsters.

"Oh! Enemy sighted, Captain!"

From a distance, he could see their foes advancing down the road.

"Prepare to intercept the enemy!" the captain shouted. "Man the ballistas! Don't let a single one of those bugs through!"

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers assumed their positions, preparing to stop the approaching monsters.

“Looks like they’re sending in the heavy-duty melee units and the bugs with long-ranged attacks... Those long-rangers are problematic,” said one of the soldiers.

As he’d pointed out, Genocide and Toxic Swarms were marching on the army’s position.

“The enemy is beginning their attack!”

“Get ready! Watch out for those stingers; you’ll die from a direct hit!”

Frantz’s soldiers already knew full well how potent the Toxic Swarms’ stingers were. Anyone hit by them melted into mush, dying in the most agonizing and undignified way imaginable. The crossbowmen were covered by other soldiers holding up steel shields, guarding them from the stingers.

The next moment, the Toxic Swarms fired their stingers, and the shower of death began.

“Gaaah!”

A few unfortunate soldiers were struck by the stingers, writhing in agony as they melted. Despite those losses, Frantz’s soldiers refused to fall back.

“Ballistas and crossbows, ready to fire!”

To the soldiers, this was the last line of defense. If the enemy were to pass through here, they would be free to rampage through the plains beyond this mountain range. At that point, Frantz would have no chance of victory.

Thus, they would have to make this battle a decisive one. With that resolve in their hearts, the soldiers fired their weapons at the Genocide and Toxic Swarms. As one Swarm after another collapsed, the ferocity of their attacks seemed to wane. The Toxic Swarms kept firing their stingers off one at a time, but they were gradually forced to flee because of the ballistas.

“They’re retreating!”

“How do you like *that*, you vermin?!”

The soldiers cheered as they watched the Swarms fall back. Now the Popedom was safe. The enemy units, unable to force their way through the Indigo Mountains, would be pushed back to the north. And one day, the Popedom would retake the north and even liberate the lands of the Dukedom.

“We did it... Karen, darling, I’ll be coming for you on my next leave!” cried the soldier romantically entwined with the Saania waitress.

But this flickering flame of hope would soon die out, leaving nothing but the darkness of despair.

“Wait! Enemy units sighted!” shouted a soldier, his voice quivering.

“Well, yeah, we just drove them back,” said another, stifling a laugh.

“No, from behind! They’re attacking us from the rear!”

Indeed, a force of 500 Genocide Swarms had materialized behind their rear guard and was closing in on the blockade.

“From behind?! How?! Where did they come from?!” The captain began to panic.

His bafflement was to be expected. The Swarms had climbed over the peaks of the Indigo Mountains on foot. They were capable of traversing obstructions and obstacles unfazed, so of course they could climb over steep mountains to launch an unexpected counterattack on their enemies.

While the Swarm might have struggled with crossing bodies of water, mountains didn’t hinder them in the least. The Arachnea’s queen had ordered this group of Genocide Swarms to cut through the mountains in order to get around the blockade and ambush the enemy from behind.

The plan proved extremely successful, as the soldiers were so focused on the idea of a frontal assault that they hadn’t realized the enemy had gone around them until it was too late.

“Turn the ballistas to the back! We need infantry to guard the rear, so—”

The captain’s words were cut off as a massive arrow pierced through his torso.

“I did it! All the ballista operators are taken care of, Your Majesty!”

“Good job, Lysa,” replied the Arachnea’s queen.

Needless to say, the enormous arrow had been shot by Lysa.

“Sérignan, pressure them from the front, too. It’s time for a pincer attack.”

“By your will, Your Majesty,” said the knight with a bow.

Lysa and Sérignan joined the forces attacking the blockade from the front.

“Even more enemies incoming! The monsters are attacking us from the front again!”

“Archers! Archers! Fire your crossbows—aack!”

Sérignan’s slash sent a soldier’s head flying. The rest of his body fell to the ground, spurting blood. She then cut down another soldier, and another, quickly building up a mountain of corpses.

“Raaagh! You will not pass!” The soldier who’d been looking forward to seeing his sweetheart aimed a crossbow at Sérignan.

“Not good enough!” She hacked at the crossbow bolt flying toward her, deflecting its trajectory so it only skimmed her cheek.

Sérignan then lunged at the soldier and rapidly closed the distance.

“Ugh...” The soldier sagged as Sérignan’s blade stabbed into his chest.
“Ka...ren...”

And with that final word, the soldier breathed his last.

“Your Majesty, we’ve taken over the mountain road and regrouped with the Genocide Swarms,” Sérignan said. “The enemy’s rear guard is in shambles. We should be able to take the road now.”

Frantz’s attempt at a blockade had been thoroughly ruined. The surprise attack from the Genocide Swarms had killed most of the enemy’s rear guard, and the pincer attack had finished off the rest.

“Good work, you two. This war will be over soon.”

The queen of the Arachnea was confident in her victory, but she was unaware how easily that confidence could be wrested away...



After our successful surprise attack on the Indigo Mountains, I had our army cross the mountain at a snail's pace as we prepared to advance south. With the natural mountain range conquered, all that remained were open fields. There was a paved road leading to Saania, and once the Swarm began its march, it wouldn't be long before the city—and the Popedom as a whole—lay in ruins.

According to the Parasite Swarms, the army's operations were mostly managed by Paris and Frantz's generals. Now that Paris had gained control of the Department of Punition, no one could oppose him anymore. His word was effectively law. I could still use the Parasite Swarms to disrupt the enemy's chain of command, however. I already had three cardinals and an archbishop under my control.

Paris... I'll make sure you pay an especially bitter price.

"Your Majesty, there's trouble!" Sérignan hurried toward me in a panic.

"What's wrong?"

"The Empire of Nyrnal has launched an invasion on the old Kingdom of Maluk. They've declared war on the Popedom of Frantz as well. That country pulled the rug out from under our feet!"

What? We've been completely had...

The majority of our army was focused on attacking Frantz. Since I had made sure Nyrnal was completely isolated during the International Council, I'd assumed they wouldn't be taking up military operations anytime soon. At the very least, I'd expected that they would resolve their tensions with their neighboring countries before doing so.

But reality, as it turned out, wasn't quite so kind. The Empire of Nyrnal intended to crush the Arachnea *and* the surrounding countries all at once. I had to bitterly acknowledge their adventurous spirit, if nothing else. They were fighting on two fronts just like we were, but they weren't afraid to go for it all the same.

Now our situation was turning critical. We only had unreliable walls and Eyeball Spires standing between the former Kingdom of Maluk and the Nyrnal

Empire. We didn't even have any Toxic Swarms stationed there to fend invaders off from a distance.

The enemy's siege weapons could easily break through those feeble walls and destroy the Eyeball Spires. All we had were 500 or 600 Ripper Swarms, which weren't effective at dealing with heavily armored foes.

"What should we do, Your Majesty?"

I had to make a decision. Now.

"Defending the Kingdom of Maluk is impossible; we'll have to abandon it. Have the Swarms engaging them right now buy as much time as they can while the Worker Swarms in the rear cross into Schtraut. Also, have as many of the Ripper Swarms as possible positioned to defend Baumfetter."

We had no choice but to give up on Maluk. Northern Maluk had mines full of gold deposits, and we had bases all over that territory equipped with an assortment of facilities, but we lacked the numbers to protect them all. Unfortunately, we had to hand the deserted kingdom over to Nyrnal.

But we had to protect Baumfetter. We'd promised to keep them safe, and I couldn't go back on my word. To that end, I left a small force of Ripper Swarms to hold the border while the rest headed for Baumfetter. I could then use the Fertilization Furnace in my base near the elven forest to produce more Genocide Swarms and keep the village safe. Thankfully, I still had a small store of extra resources set aside in case of emergency. It wasn't much, though.

"We can't pick up all our forces and move out fast enough. Especially not after everything we've done to cross through the mountains. Losing Maluk is a painful blow, but there's a chance the enemy might go through Schtraut's territories to attack us from behind, too."

"Then I alone shall head out to stop them!"

Marching an army through the Indigo Mountains was a difficult task. The road was only wide enough to accommodate two Swarms at a time. Besides, pulling our army out of Frantz when we essentially had the Popedom at its knees wouldn't be worth it.

In light of the fact that we had no idea which enemy was the larger threat,

turning our backs on Frantz would put our main force at risk. If these troops were to be destroyed, we would find ourselves in a truly hopeless position.

However...

“Sérignan, you’re a seasoned knight and a one-woman army. Even so, you can’t stop an invasion meant to take down a country all by yourself. Everyone has their limits...”

At that moment, I realized that my own limits were staring me right in the face.

“Your Majesty, no one could have imagined this would happen. Nyrnal’s movements were completely unexpected. Do not torment yourself over this.”

“I wish that were true.”

Thinking on it some more, I should have assumed Nyrnal might try to invade. I should have had the Masquerade Swarms infiltrate the Empire and look into what they were up to. Any news of our attacking Frantz would have taken seven to eight days to reach Nyrnal, and Nyrnal had declared war exactly one week after we began our invasion.

I should have moved things along faster. My sluggish actions might have given Nyrnal the impression we were struggling against the Popedom and prompted them to launch an invasion against us.

“No... There’s no point brooding over this now,” I told myself.

Hindsight was 20/20, of course. Right now, I had to focus on looking ahead.

“Have the Fertilization Furnace in our main base produce as many Genocide Swarms as possible, and send them over to Baumfetter. All other facilities in Maluk can be abandoned.”

“Is this defeat, Your Majesty?”

“Have we lost?”

Voices from the collective consciousness reached out to me all at once.

No, we haven’t lost. We’ll definitely get back at them for this. In order to do that, we need to bury Frantz as quickly as possible. Mark my words, Nyrnal:

once we're done with this despicable country, you'll be next.



“Prepare for landing! I repeat, prepare for landing!”

A military battalion from Nyrnal was crossing the Themel River, located on the border between the old Kingdom of Maluk and the Empire of Nyrnal. Their catapults had destroyed the walls built along the river, after which the troops had begun crossing the river in rowboats.

“To think that we can now cross the Themel so easily...” murmured Emperor Maximillian, watching the soldiers crossing the river and charging into Maluk’s territories from his vantage point on a nearby hill. He, too, was clad in Nyrnal’s military uniform.

At this very moment, he was watching an operation unfold which would later be called the “Deceptive Deployment.” He had made it appear as though Nyrnal were intending to invade Frantz, when in fact he had planned all along to send his men across the Themel and into Maluk’s old territories.

“With this, Maluk is effectively ours, Your Majesty. It was well worth the wait. We owe it all to those bugs; we ought to thank them.”

“That’s right. We truly can’t thank the Arachnea enough for eliminating the Kingdom of Maluk. Let them rampage as much as they want and throw this world’s equilibrium out of balance. We will only reap the benefits.”

The Empire of Nyrnal had chosen to capitalize on the threat of the Arachnea. Now that the armies of the world were either scorched or scattered, Nyrnal could conquer other countries with ease.

Frantz’s current situation was one such example. The Arachnea’s invasion had left the Popedom in shambles, which meant the Empire was guaranteed to get at least some of its land by attacking it now.

Emperor Maximillian’s grand ambition was to see Nyrnal’s banner—a dragon brandishing a sword—flying high over every single country on the continent. And soon enough, his dream would be realized. He knew the Arachnea couldn’t drop everything and leave Frantz at this point; doing so would only invite a counterattack. Besides, the Arachnea was otherwise poised to deliver the killing

blow.

Frantz's pathetic army as it was now would easily be crushed by Nyrnal's forces, and then the Empire could creep up on the Arachnea and strike it from behind. Put simply, the current state of affairs presented a golden opportunity for Nyrnal.

"The Popedom of Frantz has been dealt some much-deserved divine retribution, I'd say," Maximillian continued. "The headquarters of that arrogant Church of Holy Light will be wiped out by the power of a true god. Well, perhaps their fate is nothing quite so poetic. They'll simply be devoured alive by bugs."

Bertholdt von Bülow, the Empire's Chief Cabinet Secretary, was listening intently to his lord's words. Not a single utterance that left the emperor's lips was to be missed. Doing so would incur the emperor's wrath, and that would end with Bertholdt being torn apart. Among all the emperors in Nyrnal's history, Maximillian was one of the most coldhearted and merciless.

"Your Majesty! The first landing force has engaged the insects in battle! Their resistance is weak!" one general reported.

"Hmph. The so-called queen of the Arachnea disappoints me. She likely didn't expect we'd cross the Themel River." Maximillian shrugged. "Now, advance. I want Maluk's territories under our control within the next month. After that, we march on Schtraut. We can only take a small portion of Frantz's land at the moment, but we need only focus on defending it. Once we offer the other allied nations protection from the Arachnea, the entire continent will be ours."

They were already applying diplomatic pressure to the countries in the alliance. The allied nations were given the choice of being overrun by the insects or coming under Nyrnal's protection. Most countries were showing signs of cracking under the pressure; it was only a matter of time until they caved.

"That only leaves the Eastern Trade Union and the Nabreej archipelago," Maximillian said, turning his gaze to Bertholdt.

"Yes. Worry not, Your Majesty; the investigation is already underway. However, I believe both merchant nations will likely reject an alliance with us."

Bertholdt's intelligence network had already sent feelers out to these

countries. The Eastern Trade Union's relations with Nyrnal were poor to begin with. Its relationship with the Popedom was rather frigid as well, but ever since Nyrnal had started aggressively expanding and uniting the southern countries under its rule, the Eastern Trade Union had treated the Empire with outright hostility. The merchants likely feared the prospect of becoming Nyrnal's next conquest.

"Those fools... Now they're trapped between us and the Arachnea, and they'll be unable to move. Well, no matter. We can get rid of them however we wish later on. For now, we'll allow them to act freely. By the way, let's have our Dragon Roosts increase their activity. I hear the insects have taken to using some unusual tactics, so wyverns alone may prove insufficient."

Maximillian turned his gaze back to the troops crossing the river. They were just human soldiers, but the wyverns soaring in the sky above were different. This life-form was not found anywhere else on the continent. They were too obedient to be monsters but too ferocious to be animals. These creatures only existed in the Nyrnal Empire.

The existence of the wyverns was mysterious and incomprehensible. The only ones who knew the truth behind it all were Emperor Maximillian and Bertholdt von Bülow.

No... there was one more who knew. A devil frolicking in the darkness as she chanted away in manic verse.



We had to take down the Popedom of Frantz as quickly as possible. Objectives often changed or updated in single-player mode, but never before had I been blindsided like this. The Swarm's strength must have lulled me into a false sense of security and made me overconfident.

I needed to reflect on this experience. I'd learned the painful lesson that there were things even we couldn't do.

"The enemy soldiers aren't approaching Baumfetter," I said quietly, observing the village through the collective consciousness. "That's good. And we've managed to produce those Genocide Swarms in time, so they won't be completely defenseless."

Baumfetter, sandwiched between the Kingdom of Maluk and the Empire of Nyrnal, had been exposed to danger ever since our arrival. If we were to leave it unprotected, it would eventually be discovered, and the elves would all be killed for not worshiping the God of Light.

I couldn't let that happen. I promised I'd protect them.

"Baumfetter should manage to survive, somehow. Right now, we have to focus on the Popedom."

We had made it through the Indigo Mountains and had begun sweeping through the plains, hurrying toward Saania while avoiding contact with Nyrnal's forces. I had to evade a skirmish with them if I was to topple Frantz without a moment to spare.

"Sérignan, what's our marching speed?"

"We're making good time, Your Majesty. We should reach Saania within two or three days."

It might have been a bit hard on the Swarm, but speed was our greatest advantage right now. We had to keep going at full throttle and put a quick end to the Popedom of Frantz. After that, we'd be able to use its former territories to surge into the Empire of Nyrnal.

There was also the option of going back to Schtraut, but I quickly discarded that idea. With us in position to directly threaten the Empire, they'd have no choice but to respond. And besides, we didn't have the time to head all the way back to the Dukedom just so we could retake Maluk.

Eventually, we *would* retake Maluk and put the elves at ease... but not right now.

"I'm kind of tired..."

"You should rest, Your Majesty. You haven't slept for three days."

That much was true. Ever since the situation with Nyrnal had escalated, I hadn't slept a wink.

"But I can't afford to rest right now, Sérignan. We are in dire straits. The Nyrnals already have most of Maluk under their control, and who knows when

they might attack Baumfetter. We've begun preparations to fortify Schtraut, but I don't know if we can actually push them back."

Nyrnal's soldiers had already taken over half of Maluk's territories. The Ripper Swarms had bravely tried to fend them off, but all they could do was stall for time. Nyrnal's infantry was heavily armored, so the Ripper Swarms really couldn't do much more than that. Thanks to their delaying the enemy, however, we were able to increase our defenses around Baumfetter. I could say with confidence that the Swarms' deaths were not in vain.

"Besides, Nyrnal has airborne forces. And that's problematic for us."

What set Nyrnal apart from the other nations we'd fought so far was that they employed wyverns. We knew they were capable of ferrying up to three people on their backs and breathing fire, as well as diving in and biting their opponents.

My preparations so far hadn't accounted for airborne forces. The Arachnea *did* have units capable of shooting them down, like Fire and Toxic Swarms, but none were stationed in the Kingdom of Maluk.

The only silver lining was that Baumfetter was hidden and protected by the trees, which meant the wyverns wouldn't be able to spot it from the sky. Our main base and the tunnels I'd originally woken up in had avoided detection for the same reason.

But man, I'm seriously exhausted.

Maybe I was accessing the collective consciousness all too often, but my perception of who I was was growing more and more vague. Thus, I decided to try and remind myself of my own identity.

I am Grevillea. My goal is to return to Japan at some point. I am 18 years old and a freshman in college. I mustn't forget that. That's who I am. I am part of the Swarm, but the Swarm doesn't define me.

"Your Majesty, I'm sorry, but you really must rest," Sérignan continued, fretting. "You're awfully pale. If you collapsed from exhaustion, it would be the biggest loss imaginable for the Swarm."

She must have been terribly worried; I could see tears in her eyes. I was

happy to see how deeply she cared about me.

“Fine. I’ll rest for a while. Wake me up if anything happens, though.”

“Understood.” She nodded.

With that said, I headed for the rear seat of the carriage we were riding in and curled up into a ball.

Can I really win this war? Can I really keep my promise to the elves... and my promise to the Swarm?

Oh, and there was one more promise I made, but I couldn’t remember what it was.

I just... couldn’t remember...



My ears were tickled by the sound of someone playing a piano. It was a cheerful, upbeat tune that prompted me to open my eyes. I was in an unfamiliar theater, sitting in one of the seats. Up on stage, a girl was playing piano with deft, delicate motions.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

She retracted her hands and turned to face me, then motioned for me to approach. Her frilly gothic outfit was very familiar.

“Samael?”

“Yes, it is I, Samael. What do you think of this place? Personally, I’m pretty pleased with it. Impressive, no? I think it gives the Teatro alla Scala a run for its money. And I think my little recital was exquisite, too, if I do say so myself.”

It was... okay, I thought to myself in what probably passed for defiance. I mean, it wasn’t bad.

“Where’s Sandalphon?”

“Oh, her? She’s not here at the moment. How about you try to handle things by yourself for once? Try to face and resist me, the allure of malice and pleasure, all by yourself.”

Sandalphon, who was always around in times like these, was nowhere to be

found.

“You’ve been in that environment for a while now, and yet you still haven’t gone mad. Such a shame. You should loosen up and let yourself go a bit crazy.” Samael lowered her voice to a whisper. “Surrender yourself to the Swarm, and stain your soul with senseless mass murder. That’s the path you ought to take.”

“Why would I do that?” I shook my head violently. “I want to hang on to who I am. I don’t want to be consumed by the Swarm’s collective consciousness.”

“Well, that’s a pity. Had you surrendered yourself to the collective, you wouldn’t have had to endure so much hardship, now would you?”

Samael pressed a key on the keyboard. The harsh sound rang loudly in my head.

“Give yourself up to the collective consciousness. Devour everything in your path, and reproduce again and again and again. With those superior numbers, crush everyone in your path. If you were to do that, you would never fall behind the Empire of Nyrnal,” Samael said, turning to face the piano again. “I’m sure some of the Empire could’ve been yours by now. Do you still think becoming one with the collective is a pointless act? If you ask me, clinging to your paltry humanity and resisting the Arachnea’s spirit is what’s *really* pointless.”

She began playing the piano again. This time, the piece was Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*.

How long has it been since I was able to idly gaze at the moon and appreciate its beauty? Have I even been in the frame of mind to enjoy such a thing ever since all this horrible killing began?

“That’s just pointless bloodshed,” I said bitterly.

“Massacre is massacre, no matter what. It cannot be categorized as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’”

Samael wasn’t wrong about that. I was always making up reasons to justify the murders I’d committed. But no matter how many ways I tried to spin it, I had still killed people. The fact that I’d taken people’s lives wasn’t going to change.

I had always believed my battles were done for all the right reasons, but that could very well have been a mistake. Regardless of my intentions, I had eventually done as the collective consciousness bade me.

Massacre can't be called "good" or "bad," huh? You could say the same about war, too.

"Still, I refuse to surrender myself to the collective," I declared. "I'm going to stay human, just the way I am now."

"What a disappointment," Samael said, her music becoming more plunky and dissonant. "Keep that up and you're going to break your promise. Yes, the victory you promised the Swarm. Why make such an oath, then? Because you were afraid they'd eat you alive, right? Then you can just give up now. The Swarm is already loyal to you; they won't oppose you anymore. But you already know that, don't you?"

"I won't betray the Swarm. Just as they wouldn't betray me, I won't turn my back on them. I'll keep my promise, but in my own way."

She was right. I fully understood how loyal they were. Even if I were to ignore my promise and turn a blind eye to the war, or turn up my nose at the deaths of countless Swarms, they would not retaliate.

Regardless, I would remain a woman of my word. I fully planned to grant them the victory they sought. Even if they *were* grotesque, inhuman monsters, I would make good on the promise I made to them.

"Oh, bother. I can see why Sandalphon's so taken with you." Samael lightly pressed a single key in exasperation. "But doing that would be utterly pointless. That whole world is pointless. It's no different from a dream... No, perhaps that's going too far. It's a dream, but it's also reality."

She heaved a sigh and flicked her gaze to me.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. Tell me, are your parents still alive?"

"Of course they are."

Come to think of it, when was the last time I spoke to Mom and Dad again?

"Oh, now that's just *tragic*. In truth, my dear, they're both *dead*. And your

mother...”

Samael rose from her seat and approached me, fixing me with her piercing gaze.

“Well, she died by your hand.”

As soon as those words left her lips, my mind went blank.

“Excuse me...?”

“You heard me. You killed her, you monster.”

No... but... Mom and Dad should still be alive! I couldn't have killed them!

“You’re lying!” I shouted.

“No, I’m not. Your memories were just conveniently altered. Go on, look at the audience.” Samael gestured toward the rows of seats.

There sat a doctor, holding some documents and a biometric scanner. He was saying something—something I wasn’t willing to listen to. Deep down, I knew that I absolutely couldn’t let myself hear a word he said.

Yes, I knew that doctor. I knew who he was, despite knowing I’d never seen him before.

A sudden dizziness came over me. The world was swirling and tumbling around, as if I’d suddenly been tossed into a washing machine.

“See, you remember now. You killed your own mother.” Samael sneered at me. “You realize it now, don’t you? You’re a horrible human being, the worst kind of person imaginable. Do you understand how you can resort to murder as easily as you do? It’s because you’re the lowest of the low, a walking piece of human garbage. A natural-born killer.”

I crouched down and plugged my ears, trying to shut out Samael’s mocking words.

You’re wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong! I didn’t kill her. I didn’t, I didn’t!

“You’ve gone far enough, Samael.” A dignified voice echoed throughout the theater.

“Oh, Sandalphon. I’m surprised you found this place.”

“Devils like you are predictable creatures.” She glared at Samael.

“Sandalphon, I... I...” I stammered.

“Listen to me, _____. You did not kill your mother. You mustn’t lend an ear to this devil; she only seeks to fool humans and toy with their souls. Don’t trust a single word that leaves that forked tongue of hers.”

Sandalphon then pulled me into a gentle embrace. I didn’t really know who she was, but her presence was soothing. My heart had been riled up by Samael’s words, but it was now calming down because of Sandalphon’s kindness.

“Excuse me, Sandalphon, but I was merely stating the facts,” Samael said. “She killed her mother.”

“No. She did not,” Sandalphon retorted sharply. “_____, you’ve been leading a respectable life. You never neglect to keep your promises, even when the other party happens to be a legion of grotesque monsters. That’s something you should take pride in. Hang on to that virtue, no matter what malice might come your way.”

“I will.”

I wouldn’t neglect to lead the Swarm to the victory I’d promised them. I had made this vow to countless Swarms, to Sérignan, to Lysa and Roland. I had to fulfill it, even if they weren’t human like I was. If I abandoned them, I had a feeling Isabelle would turn over in her grave. She had hung on to her promise with us monsters to the bitter end, after all.

“No matter what agony may befall you, never forget your human heart. You mustn’t become too emotional. Always stay calm.”

“Yes, I understand.”

I’d lost so many people I cared about, so perhaps I’d become a little unstable as of late. While the emotions were valid, I still needed to get myself under control.

“Then let us meet again soon, _____. I promise I will save you from this devil’s malicious game. I swear it.”

As soon as Sandalphon finished her sentence, I felt myself sinking into darkness.

“But Sandalphon, did I really...”

Did I really not kill my mother?

The False Angel

The Empire of Nyrnal had successfully invaded our territory. Had we taken the Popedom out sooner, they probably wouldn't have dared. Thus, our objective was clear.

"There it is... Saania."

I was standing with my Swarm army atop a hill, overlooking Saania's tightly closed gates.

"Once this city falls, the Popedom of Frantz will be effectively finished. We have to take this city at all costs, then prepare for our counterattack on Nyrnal," I said. "We're short on time, so we need to end this as quickly as possible."

We already had our siege weapons, the Carrion Cannons, at the ready. These devices would help us break through the gates. Given that we had no time to lose, we had no choice but to resort to a frontal assault. It took time to build those Carrion Cannons, so even the time spent on dividing my forces into units felt terribly precious.

Thankfully, the Masquerade Swarms had informed us that there were few enemies inside. Even with a frontal assault, I believed we could defeat them. The road to Saania was wider than the road to Siglia, so this was probably a wiser choice than needlessly splitting up my troops.

"We attack at dawn, four-thirty sharp. We'll charge in and bring the battle to its late stages by the time the sun rises. Our enemy has to rely on sunlight to scout, but we can rely on scent. That gives us an edge."

The Swarm excelled at battles in the darkness, as their sense of smell was much more acute than a human's. The strategy game had a built-in clock and a day-and-night cycle; to make use of this feature, some units excelled during daytime while others triumphed under the cover of night.

While the Arachnea was one of the factions unhindered by nightfall, it didn't receive bonus modifiers when fighting in the dark. Only undead units received

those kinds of perks. Conversely, cleric units received bonuses during daytime. This was a double-edged sword, since the undead and cleric units saw a reduction in their stats during the day and night, respectively.

That was how the game kept things balanced. No unit or faction held all the advantages. The game was played as an esport, so it treated any changes in the meta or mechanics with extreme care.

Amusingly, this meant that I was, for all intents and purposes, an athlete.

“It’s nearly time, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, finally. We’ll win this time, just as I promised.”

I would keep this promise and grant them the victory they wanted. I’d keep my promise to Sandalphon, too: I would not forget my human heart.



At half past four in the morning, the Arachnea began its assault on Saania. The Carrion Cannons fired hunks of flesh at the walls, scattering poison into the air and causing the ramparts to decay. Soldiers manning the ballistas on the walls were poisoned by the shots, falling over in agony as they died.

Before long, the gates started to crumble.

“Digger Swarms, commence your internal attack.”

The Digger Swarms started destroying the giant bolts on the gates, burrowing underground to go behind the enemy’s walls. Frantz’s soldiers were so surprised by the sudden onslaught that it took them time to start fighting back. That, as it turned out, was a fatal mistake. The gate couldn’t withstand the combined attacks of the Carrion Cannons and Digger Swarms, so it quickly broke apart. With this, we had created an opening.

“Forward march. Suppress Saania! But...” I paused. This was the most critical part of the operation. “Ignore the civilians. Kill only the soldiers. That will do for now.”

This time, I prioritized killing the soldiers alone. I didn’t have the time to waste on butchering the civilians. The Ripper Swarms that would come later on could handle them. At the moment, we needed to defeat the Popedom as

quickly as we could.

“Understood, everyone? All right, onward! Crush them!”

“Onwaaaard!”

Rows of Genocide and Toxic Swarms marched into battle, led by Sérignan and Lysa. The Toxic Swarms, positioned in the rear, rained countless stingers upon the enemy soldiers. Sérignan and Lysa charged into enemy lines, and the Genocide Swarms followed after them like a surging wave, swallowing the soldiers as they pushed through.

Their coordination was perfect. The rear supported the front while the front defended the rear, and the hero units cut open a path. It was a flawless battle.

“Haaaaaaah!”

“Let’s do thiiiis!”

The coordination between Sérignan and Lysa, in particular, was phenomenal. Lysa shot down the archers who threatened to harm Sérignan, ensuring her safety. Sérignan then rushed into these openings and hacked away at our enemies.

For a moment, I had to wonder if they were actually sisters. If nothing else, I desperately wanted Sérignan and Lysa to survive. Each of them was a one-of-a-kind unit and utterly irreplaceable. They were my valuable subordinates... and my friends.

My emotions were transmitted to Sérignan as she fought. The enemy’s resistance was gradually becoming weaker, and their defensive lines were growing thinner. At this rate, we would prove victorious before sunrise.

But of course, nothing ever goes quite as planned. Just as the Kingdom of Maluk had summoned angels to deal with us, the Popedom of Frantz was about to send forth a very tricky enemy.



“They’ve broken through the walls! There’s nothing left to keep us safe!” This shout echoed throughout the meeting hall in Saania’s great basilica, where an emergency Cardinals’ Council was currently being held.

The pope attended this meeting in spite of his ill health, which stood as evidence to just how critical the Popedom's situation was.

"Just who was it who said we'd be able to beat the monsters on land to begin with?!"

"That was Cardinal Pamphilj, of course." Some of the cardinals, who remained expressionless even now, turned their vacant gazes toward Paris.

"Well, err, yes, I did suggest that we engage them on land, but all of you agreed with me!" Paris cried in a panic. "This isn't just my responsibility! Everyone present is equally accountable!"

After Paris took over as head of the Department of Punition, he thought he was safe—but now the monsters were threatening his life. At this very moment, they were darkening his doorstep. If he couldn't protect his own life, his political position would mean nothing.

"I still believe the responsibility falls on you, Cardinal Pamphilj."

"He said we would be likely to win if we engaged them on land."

Paris was finding the situation unbearable. Over half the cardinals were insisting the responsibility lay with him. They kept blaming him, as if to say they were in no way at fault.

"What an irresponsible lot you are! You shameless good-for-nothings!" Paris shouted, incensed.

"The only shameless one here is you, Cardinal Pamphilj."

"Fine! Then we must use our last resort! We will awaken the Seraph Metatron! I trust no one has any objections there?!"

"This is your responsibility."

"Do not think that using others will absolve you of your crimes."

The cardinals ignored him and continued to repeat themselves.

"Aaargh! The fact that you're trying to pin the blame on another proves you are heretics against the God of Light! Inquisitors! Execute them in the name of the inquisition!"

At his call, white-robed inquisitors entered the room.

“Wait, Paris. Have the inquisitors step back,” Pope Benedictus III interjected. “Executing cardinals will only cause unrest and bring dismay to the citizens. They will lose their faith and wander about in search of a leader.”

“But, Your Holiness—”

“I will hold you accountable for your assertions later, but for now, I approve of summoning Metatron. If Metatron’s power will spare us from defeat, I will absolve you of all responsibility. Is that acceptable? Hrk... Urk!”

The pope was suddenly assailed by a coughing fit. He was on the verge of death. For a while now, his old body had been failing him, with his lungs and heart being particularly defective.

“Very well, Your Holiness. I will use Metatron and grant us certain victory. And I should hope it will shut the mouth of these fools, who do nothing but push blame on others.” Paris gave the other cardinals a venomous glare.

“Hurry, Paris. Time is not on our side. I can hear the insects’ march just outside. You must put an end to this quickly.”

“Rest assured, Your Holiness, with the great Metatron on our side, we will be victorious. Yes... Armed with the Marianne’s ancient heritage, we will not be defeated.”

Supposedly, the Marianne was a faction from the same game as the Arachnea. Why had its name been invoked here? Paris himself was unaware of the deeper connection even as he strode off to activate the Seraph Metatron, the hero unit of the Marianne.

“Should Cardinal Pamphilj fail, he will be utterly finished.”

“He will have to bear the responsibility for this defeat.”

The cardinals controlled by Parasite Swarms transmitted word of what had transpired to the Arachnea’s queen. Paris was, without a doubt, under heavy pressure. What would they do once he was defeated?

But first, a more important question remained: who would win? Paris and the Seraph Metatron, or the queen of the Arachnea and her Swarm? The answer

would come soon enough.



We had broken through the enemy's defensive lines, and we now stood before Saania's great basilica.

"So, we've finally come this far," I said, feeling oddly sentimental as I looked up at the grand building.

It didn't look so much like a religious structure as some worldly king's palace. There wasn't even the slightest hint of spiritual mystique. Clearly Frantz's so-called faithful valued opulence over the virtues of their god.

"Another gate, huh? We'll have to use some pretty unpleasant means here."

Thanks to our reconnaissance, we were already aware of this extra set of gates, but they vexed me now that we were so close. Setting up the Carrion Cannons here would be annoying. Employing the Digger Swarms was an option, but if there were armored soldiers inside, we'd just take needless losses.

This left me with only one option, and a pretty nasty one at that.

"Sérignan, Lysa, we'll be busting through in fifteen minutes. Make sure you're ready."

"Understood, Your Majesty," Sérignan replied.

I silently made my play and then waited.

Booooooom!

Suddenly, the sound of a rumbling explosion rang out as the gates were blown open from the inside.

"The Masquerade Swarms..." Sérignan muttered.

"Yep. I don't really like suicide bombing, though."

The Masquerade Swarms' self-destruction blew a hole through the gates to the great basilica. With this, we had a free pass into the Popedom's core.

Or... maybe not.

"You've come far enough!" someone called down to us from atop a long

staircase.

“Paris,” I said through gritted teeth.

Paris Pamphilj. I had etched the man’s face into my memory. This was the first time we’d met in person, but I knew him all too well. Here was the man who had pushed for the sort of execution that led to Isabelle’s painful death. I would never, ever forgive him.

“Paris Pamphilj... There is much I’d like to do to you, but first you’re going to hear me out.”

“Shut up! So, you’re the Arachnea’s queen, are you? Well, no matter! Your life ends here!” Paris proclaimed. “You shall not take even one step further. You will not besmirch this holy land any more than you already have!”

“Oh. That’s interesting. What are you gonna do, call your angel? Sic a basilisk on us? Or maybe bring out that thing you call Metatron? It doesn’t matter what you do, so go ahead. Try me.”

“Hmph. You know of Metatron, do you? But judging by your attitude, you have no idea how fearsome it truly is. Well then, you’ll have to learn the hard way!”

At that moment a hymn began playing from within the basilica. I could tell it was a hymn because it was inflated with grandiosity, and it was fairly boring. Religious music really wasn’t my thing.

And to the sound of that solemn music, light shone down on us as a giant figure came into view. Its humanoid body was covered in armor, and it carried a longsword in one hand.

Wait. I know this.

“The Seraph Metatron!” I blurted. “That’s the final evolved form of the Marianne’s hero unit!”

In the game, this was the Marianne’s hero unit. It started off as the Archangel Metatron. After evolving several times, it reached its final form, the Seraph Metatron.

When I first heard the name, I’d thought it would be the same kind of

monster Maluk's knights had summoned so long ago. But I was wrong. The Seraph Metatron was by no means just an annoying presence on the battlefield.

I rapidly began firing off orders. "Sérignan, Lysa, concentrate your attacks on the giant! Genocide and Toxic Swarms, hold your positions! Toxic Swarms, shower it with stingers, and Genocide Swarms, brace for an attack!"

"By your will!" Sérignan and Lysa shouted in unison.

Sérignan charged Metatron with her corrupted holy sword in hand, while Lysa used her longbow to fire multiple arrows at once. The Genocide Swarms stood in a defensive formation, and the Toxic Swarms fired their projectiles at Metatron.

"Raaagh! In the name of God, you shall be defeated! Only faith will bring about salvation!" the monster cried.

Our assault should have done a number on Metatron. I'd managed to beat it in the game before with just normal attacks, even though I'd had to sacrifice a lot of Swarms to do it. There had also been one instance where an ally of mine playing the Gregoria used his Fire Drakes to reduce Metatron to ash.

When it came to hero units, sinking them with standard units was almost impossible unless you were willing to take large losses. Sérignan was a good example of this. Hero units were so strong that you would have to send in droves of standard units to even have a chance to defeat them.

Worse yet, the sun was shining down on us from above. The Seraph Metatron, like many other good-aligned units, was strongest in direct sunlight. In other words, that monster was currently in peak condition.

"Faith! Unyielding, wholehearted faith!" Metatron shouted, swinging its longsword.

"Ngh!"

"Aaaah!"

That one blow from Metatron sent Sérignan flying dozens of meters back, eventually slamming her against a wall, and caused Lysa to tumble down a flight of steps. The Genocide Swarms planted themselves firmly on the ground,

desperately maintaining their defensive positions.

“Sérignan! You have to chip away at Metatron, no matter what! You’re the only one here who can do it! I’m counting on you, so do whatever you can to take it down!”

“Understood, Your Majesty!”

Sending in one hero unit to slay another was the most effective method. In situations where a player had already lost their hero unit, they had no choice but to rely on numbers. At that point, however, the losses would be grave enough to turn the tide of battle against them.

Still, Sérignan was only in her third form. One of the Arachnea’s weak points—the fact that its hero units matured at a slower rate in the endgame—was rearing its ugly head.

Can she win? No, she has to win. By any means necessary.

“Lysa! Give Sérignan covering fire from behind! Shoot fire arrows, venom-dipped arrows, anything you’ve got! Just keep firing!”

“Roger, Your Majesty!”

Lysa quickly got to shooting. While she had a name, she wasn’t a hero unit, so there were limits to what she could achieve. Regardless, I ordered her to do whatever she could. I had limited manpower, so I had to use it appropriately.

“Hmph!”

“Haaah!”

Metatron and Sérignan locked blades with a deafening metallic clash. My knight was clearly being pushed back, but she desperately held her ground. She probably sensed my will through the collective consciousness because her movements were nimbler than usual.

“Haaaaaah!”

At last, she landed a blow. Her blade slashed across Metatron’s chest, and the corrupted holy sword dug deep into the giant’s flesh. But still, the damned thing wouldn’t fall.

Even that wasn't enough?!

“’Tis useless! Those without faith cannot oppose me!” Metatron bellowed as its counterattack hit Sérignan head-on.

She was sent flying backward like a leaf being blown away by a tornado, and her body crashed into the wall once again. Cracks ran through her armor. Just looking at it pained me.

“I will not... give up! I will not surrender! For Her Majesty!” Sérignan cried as she recovered from the impact.

“I’ll cover for you!” Lysa yelled.

“Ngggh!”

Lysa’s venom-dipped arrows pierced Metatron’s eyes, blinding it. Even a hero unit would be limited without eyesight. Perhaps now we’d have an easier time.

“The faithless will not know glory! The faithless will not know victory!” Metatron roared like a maddened machine and charged toward me.

Crap.

As a player, I had never needed to worry about being attacked in the game, so I hadn’t taken any measures to defend myself in this battle. At this rate, I’d be killed.

Ahh... I’m gonna die. I wonder what’ll happen next. I feel like Sandalphon will come for me. Something tells me I’ll see her.

“I’ve got you, Your Majesty!” Sérignan sliced into the monster’s flank before it could reach me.

The attack took Metatron completely by surprise. Sérignan’s blade cut through its right arm, lacerating it from shoulder to wrist.

“Gaaaaah!” Metatron shrieked in pain.

“I will never! Let anyone! Harm a hair on Her Majesty’s head!” Sérignan howled, her eyes blazing with wrath. “I am a knight! The Arachnea’s knight!”

Sérignan slashed and slashed and slashed. She desperately, earnestly, and hatefully cleaved through the Seraph. In that moment, Sérignan struck me as

extremely dependable, as if she would always be there to save me. Well, this time, she already had.

Now if only Metatron would fall, then we could put an end to all this. And yet...

“Hmph! The faithless will not know victory!” Metatron shook Sérignan off and swung at her with its sword.

“Blast!” Once again, Sérignan went flying at the wall.

Her armor was crumbling away, and she didn’t look like she was in any condition to fight. Every time she moved, a little more of her carapace chipped off and fell to the ground. The sight of it terrified me.

I was scared. I couldn’t bear the idea of her dying.

I have to keep her safe. This time, I’ll protect you, Sérignan.

“Lysa, keep it up.” After that, I made my decision. “Genocide Swarms, forward!”

Sérignan had already wounded Metatron, who had damaged her in turn. Now we simply needed to retaliate. I commanded the Genocide Swarms to charge the creature to fight on and honor our hero unit.

Abiding by my orders, the Genocide Swarms rushed Metatron. They crowded around it, gouging at its flesh with their claws and fangs. I had seen this sort of scene in the game before—regular units beating down a hero unit with superior numbers.

But they too were soldiers on the battlefield, and I knew full well a hero unit alone didn’t turn the tide of a war. The game was built around standard units, and they were an important, indispensable existence that could change the course of battle.

“Faithless insects! Your endeavors mean nothing in the face of true devotion!”

The courage of these standard units enabled them to step up and serve their purpose as weapons of war. Metatron tore the Genocide Swarms apart, wildly swinging its longsword to drive them back. But its efforts were in vain; the

damage Sérignan had dealt it earlier was slowing it down.

“Finish it off, Genocide Swarms!” I shouted, and the Swarms obliged.

They sank their fangs into Metatron’s neck, tearing into its flesh deeper and deeper still. Metatron desperately struggled to beat them down... but then its head was torn off with almost comical ease. The creature’s cartoonish end seemed in mockery of its frantic efforts to live.

Its head tumbled to the ground, the face still contorted with rage and hatred, and rolled some distance away.

“We... won?” Lysa said, surprised.

“We did, Lysa. Oh, but poor Sérignan!” I hurried over to Sérignan’s side.

Sérignan’s armor was in shambles, and her breathing was so labored it appeared she might die at any moment. I felt so terribly helpless. There was nothing I could do but hope with all my heart that she would pull through.

Please, Sérignan... Don’t die!

“Gah... Ack!” Sérignan coughed heavily.

“Sérignan! Sérignan, are you all right?!”

“I am... fine,” she murmured. “Though I admit my body is in great pain. But this isn’t enough to...”

She clearly wasn’t fine, though.

“Stay still, Sérignan. I’ll have the Worker Swarms build a Regeneration Pod, so you just sit tight and wait to recover. Lysa and the Genocide Swarms will keep you safe until you’re all better.”

“I... appreciate your concern, Your Majesty. And I... apologize. My weakness, my ineptitude... brought this on...”

“You’ve done so much to help us. We only won thanks to you.”

Yes, our triumph was all thanks to Sérignan, Lysa, and the Genocide Swarms. This victory belonged to everyone. No, it belonged to everyone other than me. All of them had fought without fearing death.

“I’m going to end this war. I’m tired of all this fighting,” I said. With that, I

gathered the Toxic Swarms and strode toward Paris, who was in shock after witnessing Metatron's defeat.

Dulosis

“Eeeek, monsters! You witch! You all ought to burn at the stake!” Paris wailed as I approached him.

Such a pitiful, pathetic sight. It suited him. He deserved the fate I was about to serve him.

“Shut up already. Do you want to die that badly?” I asked. The Toxic Swarms’ stingers glinted dangerously in front of his face.

“Wh-What do you want?!”

“To make sure you meet the same fate you forced on innocent people.”

Sensing my will through the collective, the Toxic Swarms picked Paris up and began dragging him away.

“Let go of me! Let go, I say! Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?! I’m the right hand of His Holiness, Pope Benedictus III!”

Paris continued to scream as he was carried off.

What a stooge.

The pope’s right-hand man? What good was a right hand if it served only to kill people? We might have been grotesque monsters, but this man had ordered the deaths of his own kinsmen. And on top of everything else, he had murdered Isabelle. That wasn’t something we were about to forget.

It’s all your fault Isabelle had to die in agony.



“Everyone!” I exclaimed before the citizens of Saania. “This man has burned your family members, your friends, and your loved ones at the stake for false accusations! But now he has neither power nor authority! He is nothing but an impotent coward! If you wish to exact revenge on him, be my guest!”

Upon hearing those words, Paris’ face went pale.

“I hear he’s the head of the Department of Punition...”

“My wife was killed because of him!”

Gradually, hateful curses bubbled up from Saania’s people as they emerged from their houses and filtered into the streets. Every man, woman, and child fixed Paris with a hostile glare, proof of how much he was universally hated.

“Now, do as you will with him!” I shouted, then had Paris thrown into the crowd.

“It’s all your fault! It’s because of you poor Maëlys had to die! All she ever did was worry about her parents, and you punished her with something so terrible!”

“This man is the *real* heretic! The God of Light is supposed to be a merciful god, but this man executed anyone he felt like! There isn’t a sliver of mercy in him!”

One of the people in the audience was Frederico, the owner of the bakery that once served sugar buns. He still carried a grudge from having to watch Maëlys—whom he’d seen as family—burn to death. There were plenty of other people in the crowd who had witnessed the deaths of their loved ones at the hands of the inquisition.

“Burn him at the stake! This man is a heretic!”

“Burn the heretic!”

The crowd dragged Paris over to the main plaza, where the stake was.

“Wait! I-I didn’t! I was only following orders! Really! It wasn’t me, you have to believe me! I only wanted to win the waaar!” Paris hollered.

But the people ignored his words and tied him up to the stake.

“Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!”

The masses chanted and shouted as Frederico approached him, torch in hand.

“Stop! Please, stop! I beg of you!” Naturally, Paris’ cries fell on deaf ears.

Frederico set fire to the stake, which was soon enveloped by flames.

“Aaaah! AaaAAaaAhhhh! Help me, somebody save meeee!”

Paris' body burned in the fire. His clothes were quickly eaten away, and the skin beneath broke out in painful blisters that sizzled and popped. He thrashed around in an attempt to break free, but there was no escaping the flames, and the smoke was gradually suffocating him.

"My God... O, merciful God of Light... I beg of you... save... me..."

Then, Paris Pamphilj breathed his last.

"He's dead!"

"The heretic is dead!"

Saania's people cheered, reveling in his death.

"They feel the same way I do," I muttered.

I had considered killing all of Saania's citizens after this, but I decided to call it off.

"What will we do now, Your Majesty?" the Toxic Swarms asked me, cocking their insectile heads to one side.

"Change of plans," I said, turning to look at the Popedom's great basilica.
"We're taking over this country."



I advanced into the heart of the Popedom with the Toxic Swarms in tow. The guards had all been driven out beforehand, so I was able to go deep into the building without any resistance. If there *was* anyone left to fight us, I wouldn't mind killing them, but I tried to avoid meaningless bloodshed when I could.

At that moment, I was feeling merciful. Sandalphon had said that even in situations like this, I shouldn't forget my human heart. Thus, I did my best to abide by the promise I had made her.

At last, I reached a room at the very end of the building.

"Pardon my intrusion," I said, stepping inside.

"What the...?! Monsters!" cried one cardinal who cowered within.

"Be calm. She will not harm us," another said coolly.

In this room, there were cardinals infected with Parasite Swarms and cardinals who were not. It was only natural for the former to be so calm.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea. I am the one who leads the Swarms that have tormented you so. I believe this is our first meeting, but I know you all too well, gentlemen.”

Having used the Parasite Swarms to observe the cardinals, I knew what each and every one of them wanted.

“I’ve come here to advise you to surrender. As you can see, I’ve already beaten your last line of defense. Metatron is dead, and there’s nothing left to protect you from my army. If you surrender peacefully, we will allow you to live as our vassals.”

“W-We will not submit to monsters!”

“So in the end, Cardinal Pamphilj was beaten...”

I watched the hope in their eyes flicker and die out.

“If you won’t willingly surrender, we’ll just have to destroy this city and the towns around it, killing every last innocent. You only have a few towns left, but those people are still your precious citizens. Are you going to just let them die?”

If they chose to resist, I’d turn all their people into meatballs. I’d learned a bit of mercy, but I wasn’t totally gracious.

“You would dare use the townsfolk as leverage?”

“But their lives are important. We cannot abandon our people...”

Both the infected and uninfected cardinals discussed my ultimatum.

“We should surrender,” Pope Benedictus III said, sighing in resignation. “We haven’t the means to fight anymore. The Nyrnal Empire is attacking us from the south, and there’s nothing we can do.”

“That’s wise,” I said. “Seeing as you’re out of a military, surrendering is a sound decision.”

I’d considered infecting the pope with a Parasite Swarm, but I realized he never gave us a chance. Still, if he was willing to turn over control of his country

to us, then there was no need for it anyway.

“What are your conditions?” he asked.

“You will be subservient to the Arachnea. You will obey us without objection. So long as you do that, you are welcome to worship the God of Light, or whatever god you want. We want obedient vassals who won’t put up resistance. If you don’t revolt, and you provide us with what we need, we will allow you to govern yourselves.”

“You’re not going to demand we give you humans as food or slaves, are you?” He glared at me suspiciously from beneath his wrinkled brow.

“As long as you remain obedient, I can guarantee no harm will befall your people. We may ask you for livestock, however.”

Truth be told, human flesh was insufficient. Meat from farm-raised livestock was better in every conceivable way, including for making meatballs. Besides, when it came to breeding, humans weren’t as easily managed as farm animals.

“If that’s all you want, we accept your proposal. Let us make peace, Miss Grevillea.”

“Good. Just don’t forget that we’ll be keeping a constant eye on you.”

If the Popedom of Frantz were to break this peace treaty, the cardinals infected by Parasite Swarms would inform me immediately. I wasn’t particularly worried about that.

“And since you’ll be our vassals, we promise to protect you from the Nyrnal Empire,” I added.

“For that, we are grateful. That tyrannical country attacked us out of nowhere... No, they likely waited for the war to sufficiently weaken us. Such a sly and despicable nation...”

Right now, the Empire of Nyrnal was our common enemy. Just when they invaded our territory, they also declared war against the Popedom.

“Then we will enter a ceasefire,” I said. “Let us take a day or two to draft a peace treaty both sides find satisfactory. We don’t want to fight you any longer.”

War might've been the Swarm's objective, but it wasn't what I wanted. At the very least, I intended to put an end to all this fighting after I destroyed the Empire of Nyrnal.

I've fought enough wars already, right?

Thus, the Arachnea entered peace talks with the Popedom of Frantz. The Popedom agreed to bury the hatchet and swore to indefinitely uphold amicable relations with the Arachnea. In addition, it was decided that the Popedom would grant the insect faction any supplies it needed in exchange for the military assistance the Arachnea would provide.

Lastly, the Arachnea would not interfere with the Popedom's religious observance. Frantz maintained its right to elect its own pope and was restricted only from holding any more inquisitions.

Pope Benedictus III and I signed the document detailing these conditions, therefore concluding the Arachnea's war with the Popedom of Frantz. All that remained was our upcoming battle with the Nyrnal Empire, but that was shaping up to be a difficult one.

Nyrnal had already seized control of most of our territory in Maluk. We'd sent Genocide and Toxic Swarms from our forward operating bases in Schtraut, but they had done little to hinder the enemy's advance.

I would have to start dealing with this war in earnest sooner rather than later. I needed to unlock any remaining units and send them to face the enemy.

Don't get used to having everything go your way, Nyrnal.

Even as this defiant thought crossed my mind, trouble was brewing elsewhere.



"Oooh. That girl's not half bad," Samael cooed as she gazed at a map detailing the balance of power on the continent.

While the Arachnea no longer had control over Maluk's territories, the Popedom of Frantz was now dyed in its color. The map at Samael's feet was functionally the same as the game's minimap.

“The great emperor’s army snatched away the lands of Maluk and a wee bit of Frantz... How disappointing. I expected a bit more from Gregoria’s heir, inheritors of the legacy of dragons. Those guys should really shake things up some more. The fires of war should spread throughout the continent as everything descends into chaos. That’s why they have those wyverns, no? Why do the beasts take flight if not to set the world ablaze? Are they simply there to please the masses with their acrobatics? Ridiculous...”

Samael snapped her fingers, and a chair appeared out of thin air.

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about,” she said. She sat down and crossed her legs, the black tights she wore making a soft sound as she did. “Lady Samael’s got this all figured out. I know how to cause pandemonium. I’ll just light a fire under the Empire of Nyrnal so that it unifies the continent with renewed vigor. Yes, yes, yes. Lady Samael has this alllll figured out.”

She licked her lips, which were smeared with pale lipstick.

“I’ll see to it that the Empire learns true, honest-to-goodness panic. And in its frantic struggle, it will point its blades toward the Arachnea.” Samael cackled loudly, pleased with herself. “The Nyrnals will run across the continent, sowing death and disorder wherever they go. That is war. That is human behavior. That is the essence of monstrosity. What need is there to hesitate when it comes to laying bare the true nature of this world?”

Her expression changed. All traces of her delight disappeared, making way for a cold, cruel gaze.

“But I must admit, Sandalphon’s actions have been worrisome. She is an irritating one. She truly is trying to save _____, the Arachnea’s queen. Pulling her out of my wonderful game is one thing I can’t allow. That girl is my toy, no matter what. I’m not letting Sandalphon have her now.

“Let us continue this game. This fun, fun game. I wonder what face our little queen will make when the world is covered in corpses and the grotesque come to rule over this world. Will she be pleased? Disappointed? Terrified, perhaps? Whichever it is, I look forward to it. She’s a person worth toying with.”

Samael then turned in her chair.

“Now then, my precious spectators—it’s time for the main event. The Arachnea and the Nyrnal Empire, inheritors of the Gregoria’s heritage, will soon clash. Watch the affair with bated breath. Who will come out on top, the Arachnea or the Empire?”

Samael then hopped off her chair, landing nimbly atop a certain point on the map.

“The decisive battle will take place in the Eastern Trade Union, a corrupt country hedonists call home. This brave and foolish nation dared to live without bending a knee to Nyrnal or Frantz. Which faction shall emerge victorious?”

Despite the ongoing hostilities, the Eastern Trade Union had retained its neutrality.

“The Arachnea produces new units to bolster its strength, but the same holds true for the Nyrnal Empire. They too skulk in the darkness, using the Gregoria’s heritage to augment their army with dragons. Soon the wyverns will not be the only thing to fear.”

What sort of forces would the Gregoria’s heritage produce that eclipsed even the fearsome wyverns?

“The war will continue. It will go on and on!” Samael said gleefully. “Let us resume the game with new units, new tactics, and new victims. Ahh, I can already taste the bliss it will bring!”

She laughed again, then picked up the map and left. The powers at war were currently locked in a stalemate, and the nations’ borders showed no signs of shifting quite yet. However, the number of casualties from here on out would only rise. Swarms would die to hold the borders, and so would Nyrnal’s soldiers as they tried to break through.

Blood would flow on both sides, and slowly but ever so surely, that crimson paint would stain the map of the continent.

But would things truly go as Samael desired? The Arachnea’s queen, at least, did not intend to let that happen. The Arachnea was all at once this world’s greatest hope and its deepest despair.

Schtraut's refugees were gradually returning home to the former Dukedom.

"This group goes to the first temporary residential complex. And this one, hmm..."

Roland was organizing and handling the refugees' return. He worked with the hope that their homeland would be reborn, even neglecting sleep. With the help of some Swarms, he moved refugees into vacant houses and built temporary residences to accommodate those whose homes had been burned down.

"We're finally home!"

"Ahh, it feels good to set foot on the Dukedom's soil again!"

Relief washed over the refugees—well, the once-again citizens of Schtraut. They would be able to start anew, and this made them happier than anything else could. While they were in the Popedom, they had constantly lived under the threat of the inquisitors and feared that one day they might be branded as heretics.

Now they had left the cramped confines of the refugee camps behind and were allowed to live in their homeland once more. They were finally at ease.

"Are we really allowed to do this?"

"They won't attack us, right?"

The only thing that made them uneasy was the presence of the Swarms. Right now, the Swarms were acting as Roland's lackeys and helping with Schtraut's reconstruction efforts. But in the citizens' eyes, these creatures were the reason they had been driven out of this land to begin with, and they couldn't forgive that so easily.

Parents hid their children, while older siblings hid their younger brothers and sisters as they made an effort to keep their distance from the Swarms.

"I suppose we can't expect them to trust us in a day," Roland muttered with a hint of disappointment as he watched them.

This hardly came as a surprise. The Swarm had laid waste to Schtraut once before, and even if they were allies now, the citizens couldn't bring themselves

to trust them right away. That trust would have to be earned, little by little.

And this was what the queen of the Arachnea wished for. If she kept the Swarm from killing civilians, she would keep hold of her human heart and respect the wills of the people she had lost. Her actions also doubled as a way to ensure the Swarm would be able to survive on their own without her.

After all, she wasn't immortal. She, too, would eventually die; the fight with the Seraph Metatron had served as a grim reminder of that. Had things gone down even a little bit differently, Metatron would have slain her.

What would happen after her death? The Swarm would be left behind in this malicious world, and without a leader, they were weak. They would be reduced to a horde of insects incapable of strategy or tactics, and they would forcefully and incessantly try to overrun the continent with their numbers.

No units would be upgraded, no buildings unlocked. The Swarm would simply fight on and on. Roland couldn't imagine them obtaining victory in that state. The only fate that awaited them would be extermination.

To prevent this, the queen was pushing them to form cordial relations with the citizens of Schtraut. If the Swarm had allies capable of creating technology and expressing independent thoughts, they might become capable of pressing on without her. Even if she were to die before the war's end, the Swarm would be surrounded by human beings, so they wouldn't be seen as mere monsters.

If the Swarm could live alongside mankind, they would not need to face extinction. They would become true friends to humanity, and society would eventually accept, if not welcome their presence. In that case, people would not feel the need to be rid of them.

But that would take time to achieve.

"All right, who's ne—"

Just as Roland was about to transmit a question to the collective, however...

"Aaaah!"

A mother carrying her child of three or so years tripped as she tried to climb over the border wall. She went pale as the toddler slipped from her arms. But

the boy didn't hit the ground; one of the Ripper Swarms swiftly hurried over and caught him just in time.

"Eeek!"

The woman screamed in fear, likely thinking her child was about to be eaten, and prepared to snatch him away. But the Ripper Swarm made no signs of trying to eat the boy. It simply held him out toward her, patiently waiting for her to take him.

"You... You saved him?" she asked warily.

The Ripper Swarm said nothing and instead continued to wait with its forelegs outstretched.

"Um, thank you." Bewildered, she gently took the child from the Ripper Swarm and stepped into Schtraut.

After seeing this chain of events, Roland sighed in relief.

"Perhaps the Swarm understands Her Majesty's will better than I do."

The Swarm obeyed the collective consciousness and the queen at its center. Though the queen thought being absorbed by the collective consciousness would put her on the path to indiscriminate slaughter, it seemed this wasn't entirely the case.

Just as she wished, the Swarm were learning pity. They no longer sought to triumph solely through mass murder; they were now capable of choosing to accept others and show mercy. They did not simply reduce people to meatballs, but they had learned how to reach out and lend a hand—or scythe.

Coexistence with mankind... It might not have been entirely impossible. The Swarm had cooperated with the elves of Baumfetter, so perhaps they could cooperate with another nation, too. The Ripper Swarm that'd saved that child made the possibility seem real.

The Arachnea was showing signs of change. It may have been categorized as an evil faction, but perhaps it was being reborn into something new. This process would take time, however. The people of the continent were still far too hostile toward it, and there were too many threats to the Swarm's

existence.

So long as those threats remained, the Swarm would choose to keep on fighting. They would at times have to cast aside those merciful hearts and dye the world with blood like the murderous machines they were originally meant to be.

The Nyrnal Empire was a major threat to the Arachnea. And so long as the Arachnea sought victory, it would prioritize that over mercy. The battle between man and monster—and between monster and monster—would continue without end.

Still, there was hope that the world the Arachnea's queen envisioned could become a reality. Furthermore, there was still hope for those who had died in the many battles which had taken place thus far.

"I see it...! Oh, it's a girl!"

A newborn's first cry echoed throughout the Dukedom of Schtraut. Her mother, her father, and their midwife watched over her with affection, blessing her new life.

"She's adorable... She looks just like you," the child's father said, picking up the infant and cradling her in his arms.

"She sure does. What should we call her?" asked her mother.

"How about... Isabelle? Not a bad name, right?" He rocked the baby back and forth in an attempt to quell its wails.

"Yes... It's a wonderful name, darling. Let's go with Isabelle."

Neither of them had any knowledge of the Arachnea queen's dear friend, the brave pirate who had been burned at the stake. These two had been trapped in the refugee camps at the time, so they'd had no way of witnessing what was happening in the outside world.

Despite that, they had chosen to name their child Isabelle. What meaning did this gesture hold? What happened to those who died in this world? There were only a select few who knew the answer.



A white world spread out as far as the eye could see. There stood a single girl likewise clad in white. Her skin was alabaster, and her straight hair was a dark ash blonde unadorned by even a single ornament. Her sapphire eyes were presently closed, and she tilted her head toward the white skies as if in prayer.

“My dear _____,” Sandalphon murmured, “I believe you’ve been through a great deal of pain. I’m sorry to say that only more pain is in store for you. And still, we have no recourse but to rely on you. We can only put our faith in you and your immense strength.”

Her voice was thick with regret. She opened her eyes once more.

“We must trust in you if we are to save your soul from this closed-off world. We need you to keep moving forward. Together, we will destroy this vile game the devil made.”

Sandalphon knew where that game was taking place, and she knew what happened to those who died within it. It was for this reason that she had resolved to destroy the game. The malicious creature who’d created this cruel scenario in the first place was not to be forgiven.

“A person’s demise is terribly sad, but you must overcome that sorrow and move on. You must conquer that sadness by whatever means necessary, be it through vengeance or prayer. Should you stay still instead, you will have gone down the wrong path and played right into the devil’s hands. This is unacceptable; the game must be put to an end.”

Sandalphon’s words were like a prayer.

“I know it is terribly unpleasant that I can do nothing but watch over you and pray as you fight tooth and nail to survive in that world. But still, allow me the selfish wish to see you victorious. And the wish that you do not forget your human heart.”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“In the name of our Lord, I forgive your sins. May you find salvation. And please, forgive me for being so helpless, and for not being able to be your guiding light.”

As this gruesome tale unfolded, things were in motion behind the scenes. In

the shadows, a greater, grander story was weaving its own words.



The Popedom of Frantz had fallen, and the world was moving into a new age. With the Popedom's defeat, the balance of power on the continent had shifted, torn between the Arachnea and the Empire of Nyrnal. Now that the allied army had been disbanded, the smaller countries scrambled in search of Nyrnal's protection. The Empire, with its vast and powerful armies, was all too happy to oblige.

The front lines extended from the Dukedom of Schtraut to the Popedom of Frantz, and both sides glared at each other from across the border. Unfortunately for the Empire, the chance of a successful attack on the Dukedom's territories from Maluk's side was exceedingly low; it had been forced to greatly divide its forces in order to occupy Maluk in the first place.

However, the Arachnea's queen did not know this. As such, if Nyrnal were to make a move, it would be not to the west, but to the east. The next battlefield was set to be the neutral state sandwiched between the two great powers: the Eastern Trade Union.

Even now, the Eastern Trade Union shrugged off Nyrnal's demands and showed no sign of surrendering to the Arachnea. The merchants knew the chance of their land becoming the next battlefield was high, but it wasn't for certain. Would the Eastern Trade Union truly be the site of the next conflict?

The answer to that question hinged on the command of Grevillea, the leader of the Arachnea, and Maximillian, the leader of Nyrnal.

On this day, the Pleasure City of Khalkha glimmered like paradise yet again. All throughout the city, there was high-class wine, high-stakes gambling, beautiful women, burly men, elating narcotics, and cajoling jesters. Khalkha provided some pleasures that could be found elsewhere, but at the same time, this city was home to delights that could not be found anywhere else.

The Popedom of Frantz had denounced it as a sinful den of immorality, but the people of Khalkha saw their city as the sole oasis in this desert of a world. Nevertheless, what would they do if their utopia became a battleground? The times of peace would soon come to an end, and an era of war would begin.

Both the Nyrnal Empire and the Arachnea were eyeing the Eastern Trade Union like hungry hyenas. The nation's riches and its infrastructure leading up to Nyrnal's territory made it a tempting target. Additionally, whoever conquered this land would have an overwhelming advantage in the battles to come.

Come, dear spectators. Watch the upcoming battle, and don't dare to blink. The desperate struggle to the death will soon begin.

Special Side Story: The Insects Ponder

Everything the Arachnea's queen, Grevillea, experienced was transmitted to the entire Swarm. Thus, the majority of them felt a whole palette of emotions for the very first time. When she first resolved to take revenge, the Swarm were driven by that anger. When the elf boy died, the Swarm were flooded with a rage the likes of which they had never known. But did the individual Swarms have feelings of their own?

The Swarms pondered.

If what the queen felt could be called emotion, then they had nothing that corresponded to it. There was nothing within them that inherently drove them forward other than their natural instinct to conquer. Despite having this impulse, they had never considered the *reason* they had it. It was simply there. A drive without a reason or a cause.

But every time they were throttled by the tides of their queen's emotions, the Swarm felt that the pillar of their desire for conquest was being shaken. Everything was still as it had always been when they'd conquered the Kingdom of Maluk. After they'd entered the Dukedom of Schtraut, on the other hand, something had gone awry.

The queen had not simply sought to dominate that country; she'd attempted to negotiate. They had not infiltrated for conquest, but for an alliance. She had nearly been successful, too, but then everything had gone to ruin.

After that, their queen's heart was filled with a suffocating sense of futility—and, alongside it, a deep rage and a desire to slaughter the ones who'd killed her potential allies. What the Swarm felt next was an emotion they were seldom assailed by: pity.

The Swarms pondered.

How and why was their queen graced with such an abundance of emotion? If she were a Swarm, she would not need emotion and would simply crush others

on impulse... But she was not. Would they have been better off if she did not carry all these feelings inside her?

No, they would not. The presence of emotions enabled them to discover new things. To learn of anger, of sadness, of joy. And it was thanks to those emotions that they were no longer merely a hive mind.

The Swarm accepted the queen's emotions, and they wished to adopt more of them in the future. In doing so, they would mature; no longer mere monsters, they would evolve into a new life-form. Yes, they would become a creature capable of understanding the human heart. And if they could learn to read the hearts of others, perhaps they would be that much closer to victory.

That was what the Swarms pondered at first.

While they could understand emotions, they could not easily grasp the reasons behind them unless they were fairly simple. For example, when the queen wanted to experience the human pastime of swimming in the ocean, the Swarm couldn't quite understand her motivations.

Was entering the sea pleasant? Why did the queen feel guilt at not inviting everyone along? Pulling Swarms from the front lines to concentrate them at the rear during wartime would have been foolish.

The Swarm could not understand the concept of fun. Even if their desire for conquest was to be fulfilled, they did not perceive it in terms of pleasure or enjoyment. They did not know anything that could be called as such. They had no desire to feed, sleep, or copulate, so they did not possess the need to be entertained.

The Swarms pondered.

What was "fun"? Sérignan, who stood out among them for having a name and personality of her own, was thought to know the answer. Like the queen, she was capable of enjoying meals, and most importantly, she derived pleasure from being at the queen's side.

Like Sérignan, the other Swarms regarded the queen with respect and affection, but they did not feel enjoyment in her company. After all, all it took was for one of them to be near her, and the experience would be shared by the

collective. Besides, the queen's presence was only natural. When the time came for her to leave them, it would be their end.

What would the Swarm feel then? They did not understand the sorrow of parting. When Lysa lost Linnet and became part of the Swarm, her experiences poured into the collective consciousness. But the other Swarms could not understand her emotions. They could not parse the meaning of parting eternally from a loved one.

Their understanding of death was all too sparse to begin with. All were one and one was all, and so to them, true death did not exist. If one of them fell, it would be replaced by another. Each Swarm's individual will lingered in the collective even after its body ceased to function. And it didn't matter how many of them died; their concept of death would not become concrete until the very last Swarm perished.

By their very nature, the Swarm could not understand death or the emotions that came from an eternal goodbye. But little by little, they were beginning to understand it through the queen's emotions. The queen had endured many partings, and each time it happened, she suppressed the hatred, murderous intent, and sadness that swirled in her heart. In turn, the Swarm responded to those feelings; they slaughtered according to the baleful tempest in her heart. But how were they supposed to respond to her sadness?

The Swarms pondered.

What was sadness? What kind of feeling was sorrow? The Swarm did not know. Understanding the queen's grief was difficult for them.

But they were learning, bit by bit, how people handled sadness. Those who suffered shared their sorrow, lessening one another's burdens. The queen had shared in Lysa's pain as much as she could, and the Swarm recognized that in doing so, the clouds of Lysa's sorrow had cleared somewhat.

When the queen felt sad, were they to share in her pain? Would they be able to lift some of the burden of her sorrows?

They wouldn't, for the Swarm felt no sorrow.

The Swarms pondered.

If the time were to come when the Swarm truly understood human emotions, would the queen view them as something special? If they were finally able to understand how she felt, would they have at last become Her Majesty's vassals?

"All hail the queen."

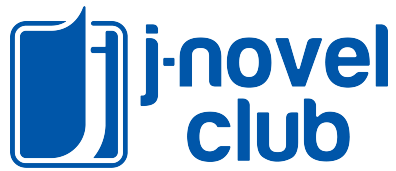
The Swarms would keep on pondering until they met their very end.



616th Special Information Battalion is an author from the city of Kumamoto in Kumamoto Prefecture. They majored in microbiology up to a postgraduate level. The author was interested in penning a novel for quite some time and, after learning of the novel-publishing website *Shosetsuka ni Narou*, they began uploading chapters of *Her Majesty's Swarm* to the site in July of 2014.

Swarm is their first series. Their other work includes *Who Knew Giving a Peaceful Villainess a Gun Would Be a Bad Idea?*





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